



Outsiders Wanting In: Asian States and Arctic Governance

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Arctic ambassadors from the five Asian observer governments speak at the Arctic Circle Japan Forum in Tokyo, Japan, March 5, 2023.

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Outsiders Wanting In: Asian States and Arctic Governance

Calvin Heng and Eyck Freymann

The strategic interests of Asian countries in the Arctic continue to grow despite the disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic and the geopolitical fallout of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. China and India have their eye on Russia's Arctic energy resources, and China is further seeking to leverage Russian weakness to expand its operational presence in the Arctic Ocean. Japan, South Korea, and Singapore are less prominent in Arctic regional institutions, yet they have distinctive interests in Arctic science, governance, and resources and are resuming dialogue about Arctic matters amongst themselves. This policy brief reviews the key differences in how Asian states are approaching the Arctic through a survey of their strategic documents, public statements, and diplomatic and commercial activities.

National Interests, Governance Preferences

No South or East Asian countries have territory north of the Arctic circle, and as such none enjoy voting rights in the Arctic Council (AC). However, China, India, Japan, Singapore, and South Korea have enjoyed non-voting observer membership in the AC since May 2013. All but Singapore have since released white papers that elaborate on and formalize their Arctic policies. All but India have appointed official Arctic ambassadors or envoys. Most importantly, all five countries have also engaged in scientific projects led by the AC’s Working Groups, Task Forces, and Expert Groups.¹ Arctic Circle Forums have been held in Asia periodically since 2015.

The five Asian observers all want to participate in the economic opportunities presented by a changing Arctic, but they have taken markedly different substantive approaches. Each country’s strategy follows a logic informed by its geography and relative power. China and India have respectively positioned themselves as a “near-Arctic state (近北极国家)” and home of the “third pole,” positing vague and expansive conceptions of the Arctic region that include them as indispensable members.² China and India have both remained neutral during the war in Ukraine, highlighting the fact that both plan to continue cooperation with Russia, especially in the energy domain but also potentially in the security domain.

By contrast, Japan, South Korea, and Singapore appear content to pursue a greater presence in existing Arctic governing structures. South Korea and Japan—middle powers and U.S. treaty allies—have focused narrowly on increasing their Arctic presence through scientific research activities (South Korea is relatively more explicit than Japan about its commercial interests in the region). Singapore, as a low-lying island-state, perceives a graver potential threat from the development of the Arctic than the others, especially if in the future a fully-developed Northern Sea Route (NSR) significantly redirects maritime traffic away from the Indo-Pacific shipping lanes upon which its economy depends. Rising sea levels also loom large as an existential threat to the island-state. While pursuing its national interests through tactful engagement in multilateral channels, Singapore has also sought to engage deeply with Arctic Indigenous communities.

1 Such projects include those pursued by the six permanent Working Groups (Arctic Contaminants Action Program; Arctic Monitoring and Assessment Programme; Conservation of Arctic Flora and Fauna; Emergency Prevention, Preparedness and Response; Protection of the Arctic Marine Environment; and Sustainable Development Working Group) that conduct the AC’s scientific and environmental activities, alongside the relatively ad-hoc Expert Groups (eg. Black Carbon and Methane Expert Group) and Task Forces (Task Force for Action on Black Carbon and Methane). Compared to Expert Groups, Task Forces are more limited in scope and duration. Note that there are no active Task Forces at present. For more, see: Arctic Council, “Task Forces and Expert Groups,” *Arctic Council*, <https://arctic-council.org/about/task-expert/>; Arctic Council, “Working Groups,” *Arctic Council*, <https://arctic-council.org/about/working-groups/>.

2 The State Council of the People’s Republic of China, *Full Text: China’s Arctic Policy*, January 26, 2018, http://english.www.gov.cn/archive/white_paper/2018/01/26/content_281476026660336.htm/; Government of India, *India’s Arctic Policy: Building a Partnership for Sustainable Development* (New Delhi: Government of India, 2022), 2.

The past three years have been challenging for Asian states that seek a voice in Arctic governance. First, the COVID-19 pandemic prevented in-person meetings of the AC. Then, in February 2022, Russia, which held the rotating chair, invaded Ukraine. Mindful of the geopolitical sensitivities involved in engagement with Russia, the five Asian states have hosted alternative conferences based in Asia, including notably the Arctic Circle Japan Forum (ACJF) in March 2023.³ Intended as a counterpart to the annual Arctic Circle Assembly held in Reykjavik, the ACJF is the first major Arctic-themed international conference hosted in Asia since the pandemic. For the first time, officials from all five Asian observers attended, including four Arctic ambassadors.⁴

Documents, Statements, and Actions

South Korea

South Korea explicitly roots its Arctic policy in private-sector interests. Seoul in 2013 became the first Asian observer to adopt an official Arctic policy with its *Master Plan for the Arctic*.⁵ One of its four “major goals” is to create space for South Korean “sustainable Arctic businesses.”⁶ As a major trading and shipbuilding nation, Seoul believes that the NSR should connect to the port of Busan as its terminal stop, and therefore takes a positive view that future “Arctic sea routes” would allow it to play to its strengths with new demand for shipbuilding, port development, resource exploration, and fisheries.⁷ Seoul’s *Policy Framework for the Promotion of Arctic Activities* (2019) softened the language of “business” to “economic cooperation” in a nod to regional sensitivities—but it also tellingly moved it up to first place among the four priority “strategic directions.”⁸

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- 3 Another such event would be the Seventh International Symposium on Arctic Research (ISAR-7), which was held in Tokyo from March 6–10, 2023. The Japan Consortium for Arctic Environmental Research has hosted this scientific conference in Japan since 2008. For more, see “ISAR-7 - Seventh International Symposium on Arctic Research: Transdisciplinary Studies on a Rapidly Changing Arctic toward a Sustainable Society,” *Japan Consortium for Arctic Environmental Research*, <https://www.jcar.org/isar-7/>; “International Symposium on the Arctic Research,” *Japan Consortium for Arctic Environmental Research*, <https://www.jcar.org/e/isar/>.
- 4 India dispatched its Joint Secretary (Rear Admiral Monty Khanna [Retd]) as its de facto Arctic representative. The others were Ambassador for International Economic Affairs and Arctic Affairs Keizo Takewaka, Republic of Korea Arctic Ambassador Youngki Hong, Special Representative for Arctic Affairs of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, PRC Feng Gao, and Special Envoy for Arctic Affairs of Singapore Sam Tan. The ACJF was also the first such forum that Singapore’s Ambassador Tan attended since the Arctic Circle Forum in Asia in Singapore in 2015. For more, see: Sasakawa Peace Foundation and The Nippon Foundation, *Arctic Council Japan Forum Program: Asia in the Future of the Arctic* (Tokyo: Arctic Circle, 2022), 28.
- 5 Ministry of Oceans and Fisheries, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Korea Maritime Institute and Korea Polar Research Institute, *Arctic Policy of the Republic of Korea* (Seoul: Korea Maritime Institute, 2013), 5.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 6.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 10–15.
- 8 Korea Maritime Institute (ed.), *Policy Framework for the Promotion of Arctic Activities of the Republic of Korea 2018–2022* (Sejong: Ministry of Oceans and Fisheries, 2019), 7.

South Korea, more so than the others, has institutionalized its polar activities in domestic law. In March 2021, the National Assembly passed the *Polar Activities Promotion Act*, which legally bound South Korea to commit resources and attention to Arctic cooperation.⁹ The legislation combined the Arctic and Antarctic spaces into one framework, *The Korea Polar Policy Masterplan*, which the Ministry of Oceans and Fisheries will update every five years.¹⁰ The 2023 edition committed to building a polar research base in inland Antarctica and a 15,000 ton-class icebreaking research vessel to replace the 6,950-ton RV *Araon* commissioned in 2009.¹¹ The Ministry further complemented these research activities by putting forward commercially oriented plans to develop eco-friendly icebreaking container ships.¹²

This context helps to explain why South Korea saw Russia as an essential Arctic partner right up until the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. In 2017, Hyundai Glovis became the first to send a cargo ship between Asia and Europe via the NSR.¹³ In May 2021, Ambassador to Russia Lee Sok-bae told Russian state media that the two countries were “conducting joint studies on how to intensify the operation of the Arctic route, and our country is considering the possibility of commercial use of the NSR in a long-term perspective.” Lee added that South Korea “predict[ed] that the Arctic route can be used more and more intensively, when seaports are equipped to service ships, a network of adjacent transportation means is ready, a sufficient number of ice-class ships is built and, in general, an infrastructure for safe maritime transport is created.”¹⁴ In November 2021, Russian Minister for the Development of the Far East Alexei Chekunkov spent five days in Seoul to hammer out terms.¹⁵

9 Republic of Korea, *Observer Statement: Republic of Korea's Commitment on the Sustainable Development of the Arctic (12th Ministerial Meeting of the Arctic Council)*, May 20, 2021, https://oaarchive.arctic-council.org/bitstream/handle/11374/2682/MMIS12_2021_REYKJAVIK_Observer-Statement_State_Republic-of-Korea.pdf/.

10 Korea Polar Research Institute, “Polar Policy,” <https://eng.kopri.re.kr/eng/html/rsch/02050101.html/>.

11 Haeyangsusanbu Jeongchaeg 해양수산부 정책 [Ministry of Oceans and Fisheries], *Je 1 cha geugjihwaldong jinheung gibongyehoeg (2023-2027) 제1차 극지활동 진흥 기본계획 (2023-2027) [First Basic Plan for the Promotion of Polar Activities (2023-2027)]* (Sejong: Ministry of Oceans and Fisheries, 2022), 7, 23; “South Korea Plans to Order a New \$200M Icebreaker,” *The Maritime Executive*, November 24, 2022, <https://maritime-executive.com/article/south-korea-plans-to-order-a-new-200m-icebreaker/>.

12 “S. Korea to build polar research base in inland Antarctica by 2030,” *Yonhap News Agency*, November 24, 2022, <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20221122002800320/>.

13 Peter B. Danilov, “South Korean Investors Explores Container Shipping on the Northern Sea Route,” *High North News*, November 10, 2021, <https://www.highnorthnews.com/en-south-korean-investors-explores-container-shipping-northern-sea-route/>.

14 “South Korea Mulls Commercial Use of the Northern Sea Route,” *TASS*, May 11, 2021, <https://tass.com/economy/1288433/>.

15 “South Korea Explores Container Shipping on Russia's North Sea Route,” *The Maritime Executive*, November 9, 2021, <https://maritime-executive.com/article/south-korea-explores-container-shipping-on-russia-s-north-sea-route/>.

Unfortunately for Seoul, the Russia-Ukraine war has gravely damaged these aspirations to play a major role in Arctic shipping. South Korea has not supplied arms directly to Ukraine, but it has participated in sanctions on Russia and has sold hundreds of thousands of artillery rounds to the United States to backfill stocks transferred to Kyiv.¹⁶ Given the dire state of Russia-South Korea relations, and Seoul's growing integration with NATO, it is hard to envision how the two countries can revive their plans for Arctic cooperation in the medium term.

Japan

Japan frames its Arctic policy as part of a broader global ocean strategy, and its Arctic communications focus heavily on science and technology cooperation. The first official description of Japan's Arctic interest was in the *Second Basic Plan on Ocean Policy* (2013), which has been updated every five years.¹⁷ Japan's rhetorical approach to Arctic issues highlights its concern about Arctic climate change, thus subtly positioning itself as a less commercially motivated actor than South Korea. *Japan's Arctic Policy*, which built on the *Second Basic Plan* and was published in 2015, stressed that Japan was the first non-Arctic state to establish an observation station in the Arctic and join the International Arctic Science Committee, while also calling for more cross-disciplinary Arctic research and a "move toward establishing research stations."¹⁸

To achieve this goal, Japan needs investment in physical infrastructure. The country does not currently have any icebreakers. Its first "Arctic Research Vessel" is under construction and is slated to begin operations in 2026.¹⁹ Japan might seek to use the G7 as a framework for expanding Arctic domain awareness, including through data sharing and satellites.²⁰

While Japanese official documents play down the potential economic benefits of Arctic development, there are subtle hints that Tokyo is paying attention, particularly in the energy space.²¹ The *Second Basic Plan* observed that Arctic research today can support the development of "effective new technologies" for the "Arctic Sea Route" and "resource development technologies" that might be useful tomorrow.²² The current *Fourth Basic Plan*, released in April 2023, observes that "Japan is the closest Asian state to the Arctic Ocean, and thus is in a position to enjoy economic

16 Soyoung Kim, Ju-min Park, and Hyonhee Shin, "Exclusive: South Korea's Yoon opens door for possible military aid to Ukraine," *Reuters*, April 19, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/south-koreas-yoon-opens-door-possible-military-aid-ukraine-2023-04-19/>.

17 Cabinet of Japan, *Basic Plan on Ocean Policy (Provisional Translation)* (Headquarters for Ocean Policy, 2013), 6, 8, 11.

18 Cabinet of Japan, *Japan's Arctic Policy (Provisional Translation)* (Headquarters for Ocean Policy, 2015), 4.

19 "Japan, Other G7 Members Look to Strengthen Polar Observation," *Yomiuri Shimbun*, April 2, 2023, <https://japannews.yomiuri.co.jp/politics/politics-government/20230402-101126/>.

20 Ibid.

21 Cabinet of Japan, *Basic Plan*, 2.

22 Ibid., 6.

and commercial opportunities, including utilizing Arctic shipping routes and resource development (アジア地域において最も北極海に近いことから、北極海航路の利活用、資源開発を始めとして経済的・商業的な機会を享受し得る環境にある).”²³

Like South Korea, Japan’s increasingly combative relationship with Russia is now the main obstacle to its Arctic goals. In 2019, former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe helped to broker a deal in which Mitsui & Co. and Mitsubishi Corporation, two of Japan’s largest general trading companies, acquired a 10% equity stake in Novatek’s Arctic LNG 2 project on the Yamal Peninsula.²⁴ After the invasion of Ukraine, the Japanese government froze disbursement of loans to the project.²⁵ Japan has participated in the G7’s oil price cap on Russia, which means it has entirely re-sourced its oil imports from other countries. These factors, alongside Russian efforts to expropriate foreign holdings in the country, makes it challenging for Japan to participate meaningfully in trade or resource extraction activities in the Russian Arctic going forward. However, Japan has secured a special carve-out for its gas purchases from Russia’s Sakhalin-2 project.²⁶

China

China’s Arctic policy, released in January 2018, uses more open-ended language to justify China’s interests in the Arctic and advance an alternative vision for the regional order. The most well-known declaration in the document is China’s claim to be a “near-Arctic State” as a geographical fact.²⁷ Relatedly, it notes that “climate change” in the Arctic is having “direct impacts” on China. Based on these claimed interests, China has hinted that it is justified in going beyond establishing goals, as the other Asian states have done, to propose a set of “basic principles” that should govern other states’ interactions in the region: respect, cooperation, “win-win result (sic)” and sustainability. This list overlaps with the “Five Principles of Peaceful Co-Existence,” though it adds

23 Naikaku 内閣 [Cabinet of Japan], *Kaiyō kihon keikaku* 海洋基本計画 [Basic Plan on Ocean Policy] (Headquarters for Ocean Policy, 2023), 30.

24 Malte Humpert, “Japan’s Mitsui and Mitsubishi Take 10 Percent Stake in Novatek’s Arctic LNG 2,” *High North News*, June 6, 2019, <https://www.highnorthnews.com/en/japans-mitsui-and-mitsubishi-take-10-percent-stake-novateks-arctic-lng-2/>.

25 Thomas Nilsen, “Japan Government Bank Extends Freeze of Loan to Arctic LNG 2,” *The Barents Observer*, June 10, 2022, <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/arctic-lng/2022/06/japan-government-bank-extends-freeze-loan-arctic-lng-2/>.

26 EuroActiv, “Sakhalin Exception: The Russian Energy Japan Can’t Quit,” January 19, 2023. <https://www.euractiv.com/section/energy/news/sakhalin-exception-the-russian-energy-japan-cant-quit/>.

27 The State Council of the People’s Republic of China, China’s Arctic Policy; Zhongguo Renmin Gongheguo Guowuyuan 中华人民共和国国务院 [The State Council of the People’s Republic of China], *Zhongguo de beiji zhengce* 中国的北极政策 [China’s Arctic Policy], January 26, 2018, http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/2018-01/26/content_5260891.htm/.

a reference to “sustainability” to reassure Arctic states that China will be a responsible steward of the Arctic ecological environment.²⁸

Chinese state officials and academics alike have noted that environmental research could be a useful vehicle for advancing China’s more expansive long-term ambitions in the Arctic without rousing suspicions from Arctic states. In 2009, Deputy Director of the State Oceanic Administration (SAO) Chen Lianzeng (陈连增) suggested in an interview with the state-owned Xinhua (新华) that China could use Arctic climate science to lay the groundwork for broader presence in the future.²⁹ Summarizing the polar-related portions of the SAO’s unpublished 12th Five Year Plan, Chen pointed out a three-stage strategy for achieving this gradual expansion: 1) deepen China’s understanding of climate change and the status of resources in the poles, 2) “further strengthen its substantive presence (进一步强化...实质性存在),” and 3) “actively participate in international polar affairs” and “establish [a] strategic position (确立...战略地位)” near both poles. Professor Li Zhenfu (李振福) of Dalian Maritime University echoed this strategy in 2021, arguing from a public communications perspective that China should emphasize its commitment to sustainable development to “reduce international skepticism” about what Li denies to be geopolitical ambitions.³⁰

In addition to laying the basis for a future claim to stakeholder status in the Arctic, China has also presented itself as a potential financier for Arctic critical infrastructure. The 2018 White Paper, for one, offers to “work with all parties to build a ‘Polar Silk Road’ (PSR),” thereby linking the region into its Belt and Road Initiative grand strategy. Chinese private enterprises have pursued a range of port deals across the region, including in Arkhangelsk (Russia), Lysekil (Sweden), and Grønneidal (Greenland), even though the mooted projects were likely not bankable. These efforts suggest that the Chinese state has a keen interest in acquiring operational control and ideally equity ownership over an Arctic port, which could serve as an independent base for Chinese maritime operations in

28 The “Five Principles of Peaceful Co-Existence” comprises “mutual respect for each other’s territorial integrity and sovereignty, mutual non-aggression, mutual non-interference in each other’s internal affairs, equality and co-operation for mutual benefit, and peaceful co-existence”. Also known as the “Panchsheel Agreement”, New Delhi and Peking agreed to the Five Principles in 1954 at the conclusion of negotiations about changing trading relations with Tibet amid India’s decolonization. While it was not renewed after the watershed Sino-Indian War in 1962, the Five Principles have been enshrined in the Chinese Constitution and consistently reaffirmed as a cornerstone of Chinese Foreign Policy (eg. after NATO’s intervention in Libya [2011]). For more, see: Dawn C. Murphy, *China’s Rise in the Global South: The Middle East, Africa, and Beijing’s Alternative World Order* (California: Stanford University Press, 2022).

29 “Haiyangju fujuzhang Chen Lianzeng: ‘Heping liyong nanji yongbuguoshi’ 海洋局副局长陈连增: ‘和平利用南极永不过时 [Deputy Director of the SAO: ‘The Peaceful Use of Antarctica is Timeless’]”, *Xinhua*, October 14, 2009, http://www.gov.cn/jrzq//2009-10/14/content_1439800.htm/.

30 Li is a Professor of International Relations at Dalian Maritime University and the Director of Dalian’s Polar Maritime Research Center. Li Zhenfu 李振福, “Beiji diyuanzhengzhi de duochidu tezheng—Jianlun beijiwenti yu nanhaiwenti de benzhi butong 北极地缘政治的多尺度特征——兼论北极问题与南海问题的本质不同 [The Multi-Dimensional Features of Arctic Geopolitics—Comparing the Essential Differences between Issues concerning the Arctic and the South China Sea]”, *Northeast Asia Forum* 2 (2021): 43, 47.

the future. So far, however, China has failed in this effort, largely because of Russia's wariness of allowing Chinese operational control over its critical infrastructure.³¹

The Russia-Ukraine war has had two contrasting effects on China's Arctic aspirations. On one hand, European countries' decisions to phase out purchases of Russian energy have increased Moscow's dependence on Beijing, both as a buyer of Russian energy and as a provider of critical technology. Vladimir Putin implicitly acknowledged this new situation in March 2023 when he noted that Russia was prepared to form a "joint working organ" with China to develop the NSR.³² On the other hand, Sino-Russian practical cooperation on Arctic infrastructure development has been in abeyance amidst Chinese concerns about EU sanctions.³³ China has also resisted finalizing terms of the Power of Siberia pipeline, though this may simply indicate that it believes Russia's negotiating position is deteriorating.³⁴

In short, China's relationship with Russia leaves it as the best-positioned Asian state to expand its Arctic presence over the next five years.

India

While a latecomer, India published a similarly ambitious policy titled *India's Arctic Policy: Building a Partnership for Sustainable Development (2022)*, which positioned the Himalayas as a "Third Pole" to legitimize its Arctic presence.³⁵ Citing Indian scientific expertise in glaciology nurtured from extensively studying the Himalayas, the document envisions an "interlinked polar programme" that combines Indian activities the Arctic, Antarctic, and Alpine regions.³⁶ While less expansive than China's Arctic White Paper, India has clearly framed the Arctic as part of a broader global narrative that is incomplete without India.

Besides polar research, the policy also calls for expanding India's Arctic footprint in the domain of space technology, which is crucial for remote sensing and environmental monitoring. Lauding India's space program as "one of the most highly developed...in the world" and boasting that it

31 Eyck Freyemann, *One Belt One Road: Chinese Power Meets the World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2020); Alexander Gabuev, "Crouching Bear, Hidden Dragon: "One Belt One Road" and Chinese-Russian Jostling for Power in Central Asia," *Journal of Contemporary East Asia Studies* 5, no. 2 (2016): 61–78.

32 Atle Staalesen, "Arctic Shipping and Energy on Putin's Agenda with Xi Jinping," *The Barents Observer*, March 21, 2023, <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/industry-and-energy/2023/03/arctic-energy-agenda-xi-meets-russian-pm-mishustin/>.

33 Ibid; Marc Lanteigne, "The Rise (and Fall?) of the Polar Silk Road," *The Diplomat*, August 29, 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/08/the-rise-and-fall-of-the-polar-silk-road/>.

34 "Russia Announces Progress with China on the Power of Siberia 2 Gas Pipeline," *Enerdata*, March 23, 2023, <https://www.enerdata.net/publications/daily-energy-news/russia-announces-progress-china-power-siberia-2-gas-pipeline.html/>.

35 Government of India, *India's Arctic Policy*.

36 Ibid., 6.

is “poised for rapid expansion,” India seeks to expand its role in Arctic issues by becoming a key science and technology partner for Arctic states.³⁷

Finally, the document shares the other Asian states’ interests in trade and resources, noting plans to contribute to Arctic hydrocarbon exploration and shipbuilding collaboration. India currently has an ice-class vessel purchased from Italy, but it cannot independently operate in Arctic conditions and requires accompanying icebreakers.³⁸ For such independent operations, India often charters foreign polar research vessels (PRV) for expeditions, but its 2022 policy set an aim to “build indigenous capabilities for construction of [such independent] vessels.”³⁹

Concurrently, like China, India expects to play a significant role in the NSR’s development amid Russia’s eastward energy pivot. Prime Minister Narendra Modi has resisted Western pressure to condemn Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and has not moved decisively to unwind India’s dependence on Russian military platforms. Indeed, at the Eastern Economic Forum 2022 in Vladivostok, Modi said that “India is keen to strengthen its partnership with Russia on Arctic issues. There is also immense potential for cooperation in the field of energy.”⁴⁰ These statements collectively suggest that India’s Arctic policy is driven by a combination of scientific, economic, and prestige concerns. India will remain a major customer for Russian energy, though unlike China it is unlikely to make unprofitable investments in the region simply to gain independent strategic presence.

Singapore

Singapore is the only Asian observer state in the AC without a formal Arctic policy. Official statements indicate that as a small island nation highly dependent on global trade between the Indian and Pacific Oceans, Singapore approaches the Arctic from a position of existential anxiety about climate change and the opening of new trade routes. Arctic Ambassador Sam Tan hinted at this concern in his remarks at the Arctic Circle Greenland Forum in 2016, when he spoke to the possibility of low-lying, coastal Singapore going underwater if Arctic amplification continues apace.⁴¹ Tan also hinted that shorter

37 Ibid., 12.

38 “India Receives Ocean Research Vessel,” *The Times of India*, December 14, 2007, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/europe/india-receives-ocean-research-vessel-sagar-nidhi/articleshow/2623056.cms/>; Bipandeep Sharma, “High Time for India’s First Polar Research Vessel,” *Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses*, November 25, 2021, <https://www.idsa.in/idsacomments/indias-first-polar-research-vessel-bsharma-251121/>.

39 Government of India, *India’s Arctic Policy*, 18.

40 Trym Eiterjord, “Amid Ukraine War, Russia’s Northern Sea Route Turns East,” *The Diplomat*, December 13, 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/12/amid-ukraine-war-russias-northern-sea-route-turns-east/>; Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, “English Translation of Address by Prime Minister, Shri Narendra Modi at the plenary session of the Eastern Economic Forum 2022,” September 7, 2022, https://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/35681/English_Translation_of_Address_by_Prime_Minister_Shri_Narendra_Modi_at_the_plenary_session_of_the_Eastern_Economic_Forum_2022/.

41 Sam Tan, “What is the Connection between Singapore and the Arctic Region?” *Today*, May 24, 2016, <https://www.todayonline.com/commentary/what-connection-between-singapore-and-arctic-region/>.

transit times along the NSR might divert shipping traffic from the Suez-Malacca route: “A warmer Arctic will undoubtedly present new economic possibilities. In particular, the opening of new Arctic water channels, such as the Northern Sea Route, will significantly reduce travel time between Asia and Europe. The new sea routes present both challenges as well as opportunities” since “Singapore has one of the world’s busiest ports.”

Singapore is therefore inclined to look warily at attempts to develop the NSR, though scholars are skeptical that the route will replace the Suez-Malacca route in the medium-term.⁴² However, the Singaporean government is clear-eyed about the challenge, and its communications implicitly accept ongoing Arctic climate change as a foregone conclusion. Opportunities should instead be found within those limitations. Tan has noted that Singapore can bring unique expertise in maritime safety and emergency response, infrastructure construction, shipbuilding, and migratory birds. Indeed, Singapore’s ST Engineering, a government-linked defense technology company, recently won a \$1.9 billion contract to build icebreakers for the U.S. Navy.⁴³ This military inroad follows a long track record of Singaporean companies building commercial icebreakers for Russia since 2008.⁴⁴ Nevertheless, the scope for such economic cooperation with Russia has all but vanished after the Russia-Ukraine war began. Singapore, after all, is the only country in Southeast Asia that has imposed sanctions against Russia.⁴⁵ Unlike U.S. allies Japan and South Korea, Singapore, as an island-state dependent on a rules-based international system, made this decision to signal its respect for international law and sovereignty.

Finally, by presenting itself as a responsible contributor to Arctic affairs, Singapore has also sought to engage Arctic Indigenous peoples by offering them scholarships to take graduate programs in Singapore’s tertiary institutions.⁴⁶

42 For example, see Gang Chen, “Asian Economic Interests in the Arctic—Singapore’s Perspective,” In *Asian Countries and the Arctic Future*, eds. Leiv Lunde, Jian Yang, and Iselin Stensdal (Singapore: World Scientific, 2016), 204.

43 “ST Engineering Wins up to \$1.9 billion Contract to Build Icebreakers for U.S. Navy,” *Reuters*, April 23, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-st-engineering-contract/st-engineering-wins-up-to-1-9-billion-contract-to-build-icebreakers-for-u-s-navy-idUSKCNIS007E/>.

44 “Keppel Singmarine—Ice-Class Vessels,” *Keppel Offshore & Marine*, 2021, <https://www.keppelom.com/our-businesses/specialised-shipbuilding/keppel-singmarine/newbuilding/ice-class-vessels/>; Lydia Woellwarth, “Keppel Delivers Russia’s First LNG Bunkering Vessel,” August 12, 2021, <https://www.lngindustry.com/liquid-natural-gas/12082021/keppel-delivers-russias-first-lng-bunkering-vessel/>.

45 Philip Heijmans, “Singapore to Sanction Russia in ‘Almost Unprecedented’ Move,” *Bloomberg*, February 28, 2022, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-02-28/singapore-to-sanction-russia-in-almost-unprecedented-move#xj4y7vzkg/>.

46 “Postgraduate Scholarships in Singapore for Arctic Indigenous Students,” *UARctic*, May 22, 2015, <https://www.uarctic.org/news/2015/5/postgraduate-scholarships-in-singapore-for-arctic-indigenous-students/>.

Multilateral Institutions and Minilateral Initiatives

To pursue their respective interests, the five Asian observers and others have joined existing Arctic multilateral institutions and established their own Asian-led minilateral clubs.⁴⁷

Multilateral Institutions				
AC ASM	Singapore			
	ISAC	India		
		High Seas Fisheries Agreement	China, Japan	
			AEC	South Korea

- The **Arctic Science Ministerial (ASM)** is a minister-level forum started by the White House Arctic Executive Steering Committee in 2016 to “increase the pace of international scientific collaboration in the Arctic.”⁴⁸ While not formally affiliated with the AC, the chair coordinates the Ministerial by “established tradition.”⁴⁹ Since this organization involves political rather than scientific representatives, all five Asian observers are involved. This political nature allows ASMs to set goals for broader collective action like deploying new technologies to enhance Arctic observation and data sharing.⁵⁰
- The **International Arctic Science Committee (ISAC)**, established in 1990, is an NGO dedicated to Arctic science research. Membership comprises national scientific organizations rather than diplomatic representatives, though China is represented via a state agency.⁵¹ Japan’s National Institute of Polar Research, China’s Arctic and Antarctic Administration, Korea’s Polar Research Institute, and India’s National Centre for Polar and

47 These “minilateral institutions”—to borrow Venezuelan Minister Moises Naim’s term—are alternative modes of collective action with a more limited focus. For more, see Moises Naim, “Minilateralism: The Magic Number to get Real International Action,” June 21, 2009, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2009/06/21/minilateralism/>.

48 Office of the Press Secretary, The White House, “United States Hosts First-Ever Arctic Science Ministerial to Advance International Research Efforts,” Factsheet, September 28, 2016, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2016/09/28/fact-sheet-united-states-hosts-first-ever-arctic-science-ministerial/>.

49 “Arctic Science Ministerial (ASM4) Scientific Research in the Arctic Region,” ASM4, <https://asm4.ru/>.

50 *Joint Statement of Ministers on the Occasion of the Third Arctic Science Ministerial (3rd ASM)* (Tokyo: MEXT), 4.

51 “Danwei gaikuang 单位概况 [General Information about the Department],” *Guojia Haiyangju Jidi Kaocha Bangongshi 国家海洋局极地考察办公室* [Chinese Arctic and Antarctic Administration], <http://chinare.mnr.gov.cn/catalog/organization/>.

Ocean Research all joined before their respective governments won observer status in the AC.⁵² IASC members have partnered on scientific research outposts in the Arctic, including South Korea’s Dasan Research Station on Svalbard.⁵³ Singapore is absent from the group because it lacks a significant polar science research community.⁵⁴

- The **Arctic Economic Council (AEC)** was founded under the aegis of the AC in 2014 and remains the only regional business organization in the Arctic. Its goal is to facilitate “responsible economic development through the sharing of best practices.”⁵⁵ Its members are mostly private enterprises. South Korea is the only Asian country to maintain a formal representative in the AEC, via the Korea Shipowners’ Association.⁵⁶ South Korea has also hosted regular Arctic Partnership Weeks in Busan since 2016, and the AEC has consistently sent representation.⁵⁷
- The **Agreement to Prevent Unregulated High Seas Fisheries in the Central Arctic Ocean** came into force in June 2021 and is the first multilateral agreement to pre-emptively “protect an area from commercial fishing before such fishing has begun.”⁵⁸ In addition to the five littoral Arctic states, Iceland, the EU, China, Japan, and South Korea are signatories.⁵⁹ According to a Stimson Center report, these three Asian countries collectively make up 58% of global distant-water fisheries, so the Agreement could be read as an attempt to constrain them before the fact.⁶⁰ Singapore and India are not signatories because they do not engage in

52 “IASC Council,” *IASC*, <https://iasc.info/about/organisation/council/>.

53 “South Korea,” *The Arctic Institute*, <https://www.thearcticinstitute.org/country-backgrounders/south-korea/>.

54 “Singapore,” *The Arctic Institute*, <https://www.thearcticinstitute.org/country-backgrounders/singapore/>.

55 “About,” *Arctic Economic Council*, <https://arcticeconomiccouncil.com/about/>.

56 Kevin McGwin, “Why a South Korean Shipping Group has just become the First Non-Arctic Member of the Arctic Economic Council,” December 15, 2017, <https://www.arctictoday.com/why-a-south-korean-shipping-group-has-just-become-the-first-non-arctic-member-of-the-arctic-economic-council/>; “Arctic Economic Council Welcomes Korea Shipowners’ Association as First Sub-Arctic Member,” *Arctic Economic Council*, December 11, 2017, <https://arcticeconomiccouncil.com/news/arctic-economic-council-welcomes-korea-shipowners-association-first-sub-arctic-member/>.

57 “Arctic Partnership Week,” December 5, 2019, <https://arcticeconomiccouncil.com/news/arctic-partnership-week/>. “About,” *IASC*, <https://iasc.info/about/>.

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

59 Despite being a fishing country with a focus on sustainable use of the ocean, Iceland is generally not regarded as an Arctic Ocean littoral State as its Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) is not adjacent to the high seas portion of the Central Arctic Ocean. For more, see “Iceland,” *The Arctic Institute*, <https://www.thearcticinstitute.org/country-backgrounders/iceland/>.

60 Sally Yozell and Amanda Shaver, *Shining a Light: The Need for Transparency across Distant Water Fishing* (Washington D. C.: The Stimson Center, 2019), 15, 22–31.

distant-water fishing.⁶¹

- The **Asia Forum for Polar Sciences (AFoPS)** is an NGO formed in 2004 as an Asian counterpart to the ISAC.⁶² Excepting Singapore, its members include the other Arctic observers, Malaysia's National Antarctic Research Center, and Thailand's Polar Science Consortium.⁶³ Indonesia, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, and Vietnam are observers. China is represented through the Polar Research Institute of China, not the Chinese Arctic and Antarctic Administration.⁶⁴ This suggests that China sees the AFoPS as a technical body, as opposed to the ISAC, which is associated with long-term strategic planning. Under-institutionalized AFoPS participants, notably Malaysia and Thailand, may seek representation in other Arctic institutions in the future.
- The **Trilateral High-Level Dialogue on the Arctic** is an informal forum of China, Japan, and South Korea held annually since 2016. It emerged from the Joint Declaration for Peace and Cooperation in Northeast Asia issued in November 2015.⁶⁵ Before the pandemic, the three countries held these meetings annually, focusing on scientific cooperation and the "sharing of scientific data."⁶⁶ Historically, the Dialogue has limited itself to non-sensitive issues such as marine pollution. However, they serve a symbolic role to frame the Arctic as a global issue, and therefore to legitimize non-Arctic states' participation.⁶⁷ Joint statements at the conclusion of the Dialogues also regularly cited fisheries, resources, and trade routes as "opportunities," noting that climate-change related factors create both "opportunities and

61 Indeed, India had pitched a proposal to the WTO asking for a 25-year exemption from subsidy cuts for nations that do not engage in distant-water fishing, citing the need for Common but Differentiated Responsibilities (CBDR) on this issue. For more, see "India for 25 Years Exemption from Subsidy Cuts for Developing Nations not into Distant Water Fishing," *The Economic Times*, May 24, 2022, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/economy/agriculture/india-for-25-years-exemption-from-subsidy-cuts-for-developing-nations-not-into-distant-water-fishing/articleshow/91772050.cms/>.

62 "About AFoPS," AFoPS, <https://afops.org/home/about/>.

63 Singapore is absent for the same reason that it is not part of the ISAC: it lacks a significant polar research community.

64 "Zhongxin gaikuang 中心概况 [General Information on the Center]," Zhongguo Jidi Yanjiu Zhongxin 中国极地研究中心 [Polar Research Institute of China], <https://www.pric.org.cn/index.php?c=category&id=3/>.

65 "Joint Press Release of the First Trilateral High-Level Dialogue on the Arctic among the Republic of Korea, Japan, and the People's Republic of China," Press Release, April 28, 2016, <https://arcticportal.org/ap-library/news/1742-joint-press-release-of-the-first-trilateral-high-level-dialogue-on-the-arctic-among-the-republic-of-korea-japan-and-the-people-s-republic-of-china>/>.

66 "Joint Statement of the Third Trilateral High-Level Dialogue on the Arctic," Joint Statement, June 8, 2018, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/wjdt_665385/2649_665393/201806/t20180608_679524.html/.

67 Mia Bennett, "Iced Out: China, Japan, and S. Korea hold dialogue on the Arctic," June 13, 2017, *Cryopolitics*, <https://www.cryopolitics.com/2017/06/13/iced-out-china-japan-and-s-korea-hold-dialogue-on-the-arctic/>; "Japan, China, South Korea to Pursue Joint Arctic Research," *Nikkei Asia*, June 8, 2017, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/Japan-China-South-Korea-to-pursue-joint-Arctic-research2/>.

challenges.”⁶⁸ While the Dialogue has been suspended for four years now since the pandemic, at the ACJF in March 2023 the three countries’ Arctic ambassadors all spoke favorably of resuming it, even suggesting potential trilateral cooperation on icebreaker development.⁶⁹ The Trilateral Dialogue might even expand in the future to include India and Singapore.⁷⁰

Conclusions

First, Asian states want deeper engagement in Arctic institutions, despite the geopolitical challenge posed by Russia. In addition to full and more distinguished attendance at Arctic Circle fora, resuming the Trilateral Dialogue, and the publishing/updating of Arctic policies, the Asian states have re-centered Arctic affairs in their post-pandemic national priorities.

Second, several Asian states have adopted similar strategies of using scientific research to establish presence in the region, as a first step towards anticipated future economic activity. All three northeast Asian states are investing in icebreaker development, suggesting that land-based research stations in Arctic littoral states are insufficient for their needs. The subtle evolution of Japan’s language for describing the Arctic highlights scientific opportunities as a gateway to realizing economic benefits presented by a melting Arctic. China, however, is distinctively ambitious, since it is the only Asian state that has actively sought an independent base of operations in the region.

Finally, Russian aggression will disadvantage Japanese and South Korean interest in the NSR and Arctic energy production, while China and India will seek to fill the gap. With the G7 countries locked into their price-cap scheme, India and China have become Russia’s most

68 “Joint Statement of the Third Trilateral High-Level Dialogue on the Arctic”; “Joint Statement: The Second Trilateral High-Level Dialogue on the Arctic Tokyo,” Joint Statement, June 8, 2017, *“The World and Japan” Database*, <https://worldjpn.net/documents/texts/JCK/20170608.D1E.html>; “Joint Statement of the Third Trilateral High-Level Dialogue on the Arctic”; The fourth one is a notable exception, which only mentions the challenges in the Arctic. Perhaps the “opportunities aspect” was taken as a given by then. See “The Fourth Trilateral High-Level Dialogue on the Arctic, Busan, June 25-26, 2019,” Press Release, June 27, 2019, https://www.mofa.go.kr/eng/brd/m_5676/view.do?seq=320574/.

69 Arctic Circle, “Dialogue on the Arctic: Japan, China and Korea,” YouTube, March 21, 2023, Recording of Proceedings, <https://youtu.be/6ZZK6P9HADo/>.

70 Anurag Bisen, “India and Asian Observers: Need for Coordination in the Arctic Council,” *Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses*, April 13, 2023, <https://www.idsa.in/issuebrief/india-and-asian-observers-abisen-120423/>; Calvin Heng independently proposed a similar idea during the 8th Arctic Innovation Lab organized by the Harvard Kennedy School, which will be published in a forthcoming ArcticToday op-ed. See Tessa Varvares and Elizabeth Hanlon, “Arctic Initiative Hosts Indigenous Youth for Leadership Workshop,” *Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs*, February 7, 2023, <https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/arctic-initiative-hosts-indigenous-youth-leadership-workshop/>.

important energy customers, by far.⁷¹ China and India will play both sides, supporting Norway the new rotating chair, as it seeks to normalize the operations of the AC.⁷²

So long as Russia remains a pariah state, however, a prospect made even more likely after Russia amended its Arctic policy to favor bilateralism over cooperation in February 2023, Asian states are unlikely to agree amongst themselves about a collective approach for advancing their shared interests in the Arctic.⁷³ More likely, Japan and South Korea will partner with NATO countries to develop maritime presence and domain awareness systems in the northern Pacific, around the approaches to the Bering Strait. This cooperation will be strategically significant, but it will not advance Japanese and South Korean commercial interests.

71 “Ukraine War: G7 and Allies Approve Cap on Price of Russian Oil,” *BBC*, December 2, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-63840412/>; Aside from the eastward energy pivot, Russia also signaled its interest in pivoting to India and China by specifically mentioning them alongside Norway and Russia as attendees of the 4th ASM. The rest were merely referred to as “observer states.” We credit Anurag Bisen for first making this observation at the “Roles of Asian Observers in Arctic Governance: Adapting to a Changing Arctic Council” webinar organized by the China Institute, University of Alberta. For original source, see “Delegation of Authority from ASM4 (Russia) to ASM5 (Norway),” Administrative Circular, January 30, 2023, https://arcticportal.org/images/news/2023/docs/ASM4_-_Administrative_circular.pdf/.

72 Astri Edvardsen, “China Wants to Support Norway in Restoring the Arctic Council,” *High North News*, April 28, 2023, <https://www.highnorthnews.com/en/china-wants-support-norway-restoring-arctic-council/>.

73 Malte Humpert, “Russia Amends Arctic Policy Prioritizing ‘National Interest’ and Removing Cooperation Within Arctic Council,” *High North News*, February 23, 2023, <https://www.highnorthnews.com/en/russia-amends-arctic-policy-prioritizing-national-interest-and-removing-cooperation-within-arctic/>.



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