# The Promise of Arctic Diplomacy: East Asian Cooperation in the Arctic Council and Beyond

Lukas K. Danner

Florida International University

East Asia Security Centre

东亚安全中心

Peer-reviewed Conference Paper

2019 East Asia Security Symposium and Conference

同行互评会议论文

2019 东亚安全座谈谈论会

https://easc.scholasticahq.com/

Published Version July 2020

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**Abstract:** In recent decades, the Arctic has become progressively important to East Asian states. In 2013 China, India, Japan, South Korea and Singapore joined the Arctic Council, the most important regional institution, as permanent observers—despite their geographic remoteness from the Arctic. While there are deep-seated animosities between these Asian powers, their shared interest in the Arctic holds diplomatic opportunities for improving relations. This paper analyses cooperative Arctic diplomacy principally between the East Asian permanent observers as well as together with the members of the Arctic Council.

**Keywords:** Arctic Council, Asia, China, Diplomacy, Japan, Korea

# THE PROMISE OF ARCTIC DIPLOMACY: EAST ASIAN COOPERATION IN THE ARCTIC COUNCIL AND BEYOND

## Introduction

With climate change a ubiquitous topic in international relations, the Arctic, including potential opportunities within the Arctic Circle and Arctic-related environmental policies have risen exponentially in terms of how much attention is granted to them as well as the priority governments are attaching to them. However, somewhat counterintuitively, China Japan and South Korea have keenly participated in the international relations of the Arctic. Their geographic location makes them non-Arctic states, but that has not prohibited them from feverishly pursuing their Arctic interests in important diplomatic venues. Most central to this development is certainly the Arctic Council within which much of the high-level diplomacy takes place regarding Arctic affairs.

Despite these three East Asian states having significant differences in the day-to-day regional relations, there have been surprising collaborations between them regarding Arctic affairs. This paper analyzes two instances of outlier relations. Firstly, it will review the recent agreement on fisheries in the Arctic Ocean to which all three were signatories; secondly, it will focus on the Trilateral High-Level Meeting between the three which has taken place annually since 2016. Some questions that are considered in this analysis are whether the three have shared interests in the Arctic and what these are; whether Arctic diplomacy has potential to ease historically often contentious relations between the three of them (especially Sino-Japanese and Korean-Japanese); and how long-term these cooperative endeavors may be sustained.

## Arctic Realities

Naturally, climate change is impacting and will impact the world in its entirety. There is a debate that the Arctic is at the forefront of observable change and importantly, how this will be viewed and managed. Climate change is especially visible in the Arctic in the extent to which the Arctic Ocean remains frozen during summer, until around August or September. In 2019, the Arctic Ocean's frozen surface receded so much that it was the second lowest extent on record since the late 1970s.[1] While this means that the habitat of animals is at risk, the Arctic ecosystem and the world climate, there are states and business people that see an upside in this change. For example, more easily navigable and faster shipping routes via the Russian and Canadian Arctic coast lines—the Northern Sea Route and Northwest Passage,[2]

[1] See Maria-José Viñas, "2019 Arctic Sea Ice Minimum Tied for Second Lowest On Record," *National Aeronautics and Space Administration*, September 23, 2019, https://www.nasa.gov/feature/goddard/2019-arctic-sea-ice-extent-fourth-lowest-on-record (accessed October 5, 2019).
[2] See Mike Schuler, "Northern Sea Route Shipping Expected to Quadruple by 2024," *gCaptain.com*, September 6, 2019, https://gcaptain.com/northern-sea-route-shipping-expected-to-quadruple-by-2024 (accessed October 1, 2019).

respectively—or even a trans-Arctic passage which will only open sometime after the year 2050;[3] opportunities to win new fishing grounds through previously obstructed ocean surface;[4] access to areas in which Arctic research can be undertaken;[5] or the exploitation of minerals, gas, oil, and other such natural resources deep within the seabed of the Arctic Ocean are among the many opportunities associated with a changing Arctic—for better or worse.[6]

## Arctic Council and Asian Non-Arctic Observers

The Arctic Council is the main inter-governmental international organization that is concerned with managing international governance in the Arctic. As such, its role will become progressively more important in managing these future *opportunities*. It consists of the Arctic Eight, the states located within the Arctic Circle (Russia, Finland, Sweden, Norway, Denmark [representing Greenland], Iceland, Canada, and the United States [due to Alaska]), as well as representation from Arctic peoples as permanent participants as six working groups on different Arctic-related topics. The Arctic Council is chaired by one of the Arctic Eight in a two-year term—currently by Iceland (2019-2021).[7]

As a result of the Arctic's all-encompassing nature, non-governmental organizations (i.e., World Wildlife Fund) and non-Arctic states are permitted as observers to the Arctic Council—either *ad hoc* or permanently admitted observers. In addition to several non-Arctic European states, China, Japan and South Korea are permanent observers, along with two other Asian states India and Singapore.

## China in the Arctic

China has shown interest in the Arctic since the late 1980s and early 1990s with the inception of its Polar Research Institute of China and the China Arctic and Antarctic Administration.[8] In 1993, China purchased its first (and only for a considerable period of time) icebreaker from the Ukraine and named it *Snow Dragon* (雪龙 *Xuelong*).[9] Two more are planned, one of

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[3] See Mia Bennett, "The Arctic Shipping Route No One's Talking About," *The Maritime Executive*, May 8, 2019, https://www.maritime-executive.com/editorials/the-arctic-shipping-route-no-one-s-talking-about (accessed June 25, 2019).
[4] See Ravenna Koenig, "Prospect of Commercial Fishing in Central Arctic Ocean Poses Big Questions for Science," *Alaska Public Media*, March 5, 2019, https://www.alaskapublic.org/2019/03/05/prospect-of-commercial-fishing-in-central-arctic-ocean-poses-big-questions-for-science/ (accessed June 20, 2019).
[5] See Shady Grove Oliver, "Scientists Embark on Largest Polar Expedition in History," *The Arctic Sounder*, September 30, 2019, http://www.thearcticsounder.com/article/1940scientists_embark_on_largest_polar_expedition (accessed October 1, 2019).
[6] See University of Oslo, "New Map of the Seabed Reveal More Deposits Than Expected," *Phys.org*, September 18, 2019, https://phys.org/news/2019-09-seabed-reveal-deposits.html (accessed October 5, 2019).
[7] See Arctic Council, "About Us," *Arctic Council*, https://arctic-council.org/index.php/en/about-us (accessed October 1, 2019).
[8] See UArctic, "Polar Research Institute of China," *UArctic*, https://www.uarctic.org/member-profiles/non-arctic/8627/polar-research-institute-of-china (accessed October 1, 2019).
[9] See. Chinese Arctic and Antarctic Administration, "A Brief Introduction of R/V Xuelong," *Chinese Arctic and Antarctic Administration*,

which *Snow Dragon 2* was inaugurated in July 2019.[10] Not unlike many other states, though a little more unusual for a non-Arctic state, China established its own research station in the Norwegian northernmost island archipelago Svalbard (Ny-Ålesund, Spitsbergen) in 2003.[11] While in the past, the voyages of *Snow Dragon* to the Arctic have been in a fairly stretched rhythm, recurring every five years or so, it accelerated to almost annually by 2018, when it undertook its ninth expedition to the Arctic.[12]

China has aggressively pursued permanent observer status in the Arctic Council. It first applied in 2007 having participated as an *ad hoc* observer as early as 1996.[13] China's first application was unsuccessful as it was turned down in 2009, and when it applied for the second time in 2011, the Arctic Council postponed a decision to a later time when the rules and regulations for such applications would be further defined.[14] Finally, in 2013, China was admitted as a permanent observer to the Arctic Council during the Swedish chairmanship's Ministerial Conference.[15] To underline its ambitions, Chinese officials have repeatedly referred to their country as an "Arctic stakeholder"[16] or a "near-Arctic state."[17]; while admitting its not located within the Arctic Circle (as are the Arctic Eight) or even an Arctic littoral state (as are the Arctic Five).

In 2017, China made the Arctic sea route, specifically the Northern Route via the Russian coastline, a part of the Belt and Road Initiative.[18] In January 2018, China published its first white paper on its Arctic Policy with a focus on advancing research related to climate change, sustainable economic development of the Arctic including shipping routes, resources and exploration of resources, as well as moving forward international cooperation, peace and

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https://web.archive.org/web/20131227210154/http://www.chinare.gov.cn/en/index.html?pid=stations&st=xuelong (accessed June 24, 2019).

[10] See Deng Xiaoci, "Icebreaker Xuelong 2 Joins Service on China National Maritime Day," *Global Times*, July 11, 2019, http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1157529.shtml (accessed October 1, 2019).

[11] See https://www.cryopolitics.com/2015/02/20/chinas-year-in-the-arctic-far-from-sheepish/ (accessed June 25, 2019).

[12] See Ke Jiayun, "Xuelong Returns from Arctic Expedition," *Shine*, September 27, 2018, https://www.shine.cn/news/metro/1809272773/ (accessed June 15, 2019).

[13] See. Lukas K. Danner, *China's Grand Strategy: Contradictory Foreign Policy?* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 65-77.

[14] See Ibidem.

[15] See Arctic Council, "Observers," *Arctic Council*, https://www.arctic-council.org/index.php/en/about-us/arctic-council/observers (accessed June 20, 2019).

[16] See The BRICS Post, and Agencies, "We Are a Major Stakeholder in the Arctic: China," *The BRICS Post*, October 17, 2015, http://thebricspost.com/we-are-a-major-stakeholder-in-the-arctic-china/#.WiRSoDe1tPY (accessed June 20, 2019).

[17] See Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, "China Defines Itself as a 'Near-Arctic State,' Says SIPRI," *Stockholm International Peace Research Institute*, May 10, 2012, https://www.sipri.org/media/press-release/2012/china-defines-itself-near-arctic-state-says-sipri (accessed June 15, 2019); and, The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, "China's Arctic Policy," *The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China*, January 26, 2018, http://english.gov.cn/archive/white_paper/2018/01/26/content_281476026660336.htm (accessed June 15, 2019).

[18] See Mia Bennett, "With the Polar Silk Road, China's Belt and Road Initiative Moves Into the Arctic," *Cyropolitics*, https://www.cryopolitics.com/2017/06/27/chinas-belt-and-road-initiative-moves-into-the-arctic/ (accessed June 25, 2019).

good governance in the region.[19] Next to the Arctic Council, China has also been active in the Arctic Circle Organization, a summit of which it held in Shanghai in 2019.[20]

**Japanese and South Korean Activities in the Arctic**

Significantly, Japan and South Korea have pursued similar interests and strategies concerning the Arctic as China. Japan has been active in the Arctic since the early 1990s and is in possession of its own icebreaker (*Shirase*).[21] In 1991, Japan established its Arctic Environment Research Center under its National Institute of Polar Research in Ny-Ålesund, Spitsbergen (Svalbard archipelago). In 2013, it became a permanent observer to the Arctic Council, appointed an Ambassador to the Arctic, and included the Arctic in its "Basic Plan on Ocean Policy."[22] Finally, in 2015, Japan published its Arctic policy in a white paper with focus on research and development, international cooperation, and sustainable use.[23]

Correspondingly, South Korea established its own research station in Norwegian Ny-Ålesund in 2002 and travels there and elsewhere in the Arctic with its own icebreaker (*Araon*).[24] In 2013, together with China and Japan, South Korea became a permanent observer to the Arctic Council and published its Arctic policy in a white paper the same year with emphasis on international cooperation, research and development, economic activities such as energy exploration, technology, and shipping routes.[25] The Arctic also played and plays a distinguished role in South Korea's "Global Korea" concept, "Eurasia Initiative," and its "Low Carbon Green Growth" plans.[26] Finally, South Korea hosted the inaugural Arctic Circle meeting in East Asia and is very active in that organization.[27]

**Case 1: Fisheries Agreement**

The "Agreement to Prevent Unregulated High Seas Fisheries in the Central Arctic Ocean" which was concluded after negotiations in the Arctic Council in 2017 and then ceremonially signed on October 3, 2018, can be seen as one case where the three East Asian states

[19] See The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, "China's Arctic Policy."
[20] See Arctic Circle, "China and the Arctic," *Arctic Circle*, May 10-11, 2019, http://www.arcticcircle.org/forums/china (accessed October 3, 2019).
[21] See National Institute of Polar Research, "Activity," *National Institute of Polar Research*, January 1, 2017 (date of last modification), https://www.nipr.ac.jp/english/outline/numeral/01.html (accessed June 15, 2019).
[22] See Headquarters for Ocean Policy of Japan, "Basic Plan on Ocean Policy," *Pacific Northwest National Library*, https://tethys.pnnl.gov/sites/default/files/publications/Japan-Ocean-Policy-2013.pdf (accessed October 1, 2019).
[23] See Headquarters for Ocean Policy of Japan, "Japan's Arctic Policy," *Arctic Portal Library*, http://library.arcticportal.org/1883/ (accessed October 1, 2019).
[24] See Korea Maritime Institute, Korea Polar Research Institute, Korea Institute of Geosciences and Mineral Resources, "Arctic Policy of the Republic of Korea," *Arctic Portal Library*, http://library.arcticportal.org/1902/1/Arctic_Policy_of_the_Republic_of_Korea.pdf (accessed June 20, 2019).
[25] See Ibidem.
[26] See Martin Kossa, "South Korea's Positioning in the Arctic," *World Policy*, September 30, 2015, https://worldpolicy.org/2015/09/30/south-koreas-positioning-in-the-arctic/ (accessed June 21, 2019).
[27] See Mia Bennett, "South Korea, An Unlikely Polar Pioneer, Hosts Arctic Conference," *Cryopolitics*, December 10, 2018, https://www.cryopolitics.com/2018/12/10/korea-arctic-conference/ (accessed June 20, 2019).

cooperated—together with six other countries and the EU.[28] Though it seems a logical environmentally aware preparatory step for a future *commercially fishable* Arctic Ocean having far less surface ice due to climate change, the agreement should be considered within the historical context of disastrous overfishing and inadequate management. Motivation for countries to negotiate, agree and become party to such a treaty arise from prior failures in the central Bering Sea. In the 1980s and 1990s, aggressive unregulated overfishing occurred in the Bering Sea, especially by Chinese, Japanese, Korean and Polish fishermen:

> Until the 1980s, there was very little commercial fishing in the high seas portion of the central Bering Sea, often referred to as the 'Donut Hole.' But the establishment by the United States and the former Soviet Union of exclusive economic zones in the mid-1970s, and the ensuing limitations on fishing by foreign vessels in those zones (particularly the U.S. zone) in the years thereafter, prompted vessels from Japan, China, Korea and Poland to initiate a large fishery for pollock in the Donut Hole starting in the mid-1980s. That fishery collapsed from overfishing in 1992, and has never recovered.[29]

To prevent the same fate for the central Arctic Ocean, as happened to the central Bering Sea, in 2008, the United States, George W. Bush administration initiated what—ten years on—evolved into the recent 2018 agreement. Much water went down the Potomac after the 2008 Bush initiative, with the next milestone on the way to the eventual agreement being in 2015 with the Oslo Declaration between the United States, Canada, Denmark, Norway, and Russian which further paved the way. After this breakthrough, the afore-mentioned five Arctic littoral states invited the remaining states within the Arctic Circle (i.e., Iceland and the EU (representing Sweden and Finland but naturally also Poland—one of the culprits in above-mentioned overfishing), but also three non-Arctic states—China, Japan, and South Korea (three of the four culprits in the 1992 Bering Sea pollock collapse)—to meet in 2016 in Washington, D.C. to hold talks on a wider table of stakeholders.[30] After a total of six negotiation rounds, the parties concluded with an agreement on November 30, 2017, and the signing ceremony occurred roughly one year later on October 3, 2018, in Ilulissat.[31]

The Agreement to Prevent Unregulated High Seas Fisheries in the Central Arctic Ocean is aimed to ensure that no unregulated commercial fishing in undertaken by signatories for the time being. The agreement initiates scientific research in order to learn more about the existing fish populations in that area of the Arctic with a view to fishing with regulations.[32] Given that all three East Asian states were included in the discussion—also given the

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[28] See Catherine Benson Wahlén, "Nine Countries, EU Sign Agreements to Prevent Unregulated Fishing in Central Arctic Ocean," *International Institute for Sustainable Development – SDG Knowledge Hub*, October 9, 2018, http://sdg.iisd.org/news/nine-countries-eu-sign-agreement-to-prevent-unregulated-fishing-in-central-arctic-ocean/ (accessed June 20, 2019).
[29] David A. Balton, "The Arctic Fisheries Agreement: Looking to 2030 and Beyond," in *The Arctic in World Affairs: A North Pacific Dialogue on Arctic 2030 and Beyond—Pathways to the Future*. eds. Robert W. Corell, Jong Deog Kim, Yoon Hyung Kim, Arild Moe, David L. VanderZwaag, Oran R. Young (Busan & Honolulu: Korea Maritime Institute & The East-West Center, 2018), 83-91, 84.
[30] See Ibidem.
[31] See Wahlén, "Nine Countries, EU Sign Agreements to Prevent Unregulated Fishing in Central Arctic Ocean."
[32] See Government of Canada, "International Agreement to Prevent Unregulated High Seas Fisheries in the Central Arctic Ocean," *Fisheries and Oceans Canada*, May 5, 2019 (date of last modification), http://www.dfo-mpo.gc.ca/international/arctic-arctique-eng.htm (accessed October 15, 2019).

previous Bering Sea incident—it is safe to assume that Chinese, Japanese, and South Korean interests converge in this case, and may have contributed to the betterment of relations at the very least in this extra-regional success regarding their energy and fishing ambitions.

**Case 2: Trilateral High-Level Meeting**

The second case this paper considers is the Arctic-themed Trilateral High-Level Meeting between China, Japan, and South Korea. Its origin lies in the Sixth Trilateral Summit which occurred in November 2015, at which the three agreed to hold a *break-out* meeting for the first time the following year.[33] For Japan, Arctic Ambassador Shiraishi Kazuko (in 2019, Eiji Yamamoto) participated; for China, Deputy Director-General for the Department of Treaty and Law of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Ma Xinmin (in 2019, Special Representative for Arctic Affairs Gao Feng) took part; and, for South Korea, Arctic Ambassador Kim Chan-Woo (in 2019, Park Heung-kyeong) served as the host, as it was held in South Korea for the first time.[34] Thus far, the Senior Arctic Officials of each of the three East Asian states have met four times: in 2016 and 2019 in South Korea; in 2017 in Japan;[35] and in 2018 in China.[36]

Outcomes of the meetings were mostly promises to work together on cooperation in scientific research areas. As such, they agreed to mutually coordinate and brief each other on research in the Arctic. Furthermore, they arranged to share scientific data and results, as well as develop collaborative surveys.[37] In addition, the three states entered into an Arctic policy trialogue. As mentioned above, China had published its initial Arctic policy white paper in 2018; Japan's third Basic Plan on Ocean Policy which includes the Arctic also came in 2018; and South Korea's Second Arctic Policy Master Plan for the time from 2018 to 2022 was also released in the same year. Apart from coordination in scientific research and policy trialogue, the three decided to explore collaboration in additional areas.[38]

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[33] See Republic of Korea, Japan, and the People's Republic of China, "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," *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Korea*, April 28, 2016, http://www.mofa.go.kr/eng/brd/m_5676/view.do?seq=316483&srchFr=&amp%3BsrchTo=&amp%3BsrchWord=&amp%3BsrchTp=&amp%3Bmulti_itm_seq=0&amp%3Bitm_seq_1=0&amp%3Bitm_seq_2=0&amp%3Bcompany_cd=&amp%3Bcompany_nm= (accessed June 21, 2019).

[34] See Ibidem; and Republic of Korea, "4th ROK-Japan-China Trilateral High-Level Dialogue on Arctic to Take Place," *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Korea*, June 24, 2019, www.mofa.go.kr/eng/brd/m_5676/view.do?seq=320573 (accessed October 10, 2019).

[35] See Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, "The Second Trilateral High-Level Dialogue on the Arctic (Results)," *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan*, June 8, 2017, https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/release/press4e_001620.html (accessed June 15, 2019).

[36] See Republic of Korea, "Outcome of the Third ROK-Japan-China Trilateral High-Level Dialogue on Arctic," *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Korea*, June 8, 2018, http://www.mofa.go.kr/eng/brd/m_5676/view.do?seq=319888&srchFr=&srchTo=&srchWord=&srchTp=&multi_itm_seq=0&itm_seq_1=0&itm_seq_2=0&company_cd=&company_nm= (accessed June 15, 2019); and, Xinhua, "China, Japan, ROK Agree to Strengthen Research Cooperation in the Arctic," *Xinhuanet.com*, June 9, 2018, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-06/09/c_137240638.htm (accessed June 15, 2019).

[37] See, e.g., Republic of Korea, "4th ROK-Japan-China Trilateral High-Level Dialogue on Arctic to Take Place."

[38] See Ibidem.

## Conclusion and Outlook

Naturally, regarding the Arctic affairs of energy and food security, there are many similarities between the three East Asian powerhouses which otherwise share many differences in the East Asian region and bilateral affairs—not just due to historical experiences of enmity or near-enmity. These common grounds in the Arctic serve as the basis for their current cooperation (and may also promote additional cooperation) beyond the two cases analyzed above (i.e., the 2018 Arctic Ocean Fisheries Agreement and the Tri-Lateral Meeting of Senior Arctic Officials since 2016).

All three were accepted into the Arctic Council as permanent observers as part of the 2013 round of introductions, next to two other Asian countries India and Singapore. China—due to its large population—Japan and South Korea—due to their lack of natural resources, being a peninsula and island archipelago, respectively—are all well-known to have a great thirst for fossil fuels, or, more generally natural resources, and have some dependency on securing, most critically, their energy needs by imports. The existing and projected natural resources in the Arctic, if secured, may potentially mitigate dependency for all three with cooperation enabling access.

The scientific research collaboration as agreed upon in the Tri-Lateral meetings since 2016 and the 2018 Fisheries agreement can logically be seen as common strategies to explore for natural resources—be that minerals, fossil fuels or fish stocks that may assist with energy and food security. Consequently, based on the above analysis and converging interests—it would not be surprising if China, Japan and South Korea were to widen and deepen their cooperation in Arctic affairs and in other extra-regional energy and food security affairs. Whether this could serve to calm and significantly ameliorate bilateral affairs, especially the Sino-Japanese and the Korean-Japanese relations is entirely questionable, but as with the natural resources of the Arctic, the opportunity remains to be exploited.