

Commentary

Does the Sun also Rise in the Arctic? Three Pillars of Japan's Arctic Policy

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Japan or Nihon in Japanese means a country from which the Sun rises. In general, the word Sun is often used as a metaphor for Japan. This commentary explains Japan's Arctic engagement by focusing on its three pillars, and also considers its policy prospects.

Japan's Arctic engagement has centered on three pillars, namely the pillars of diplomacy, science and business, although these pillars are self-sustained by ministries concerned rather than coordinated among them. The oldest pillar is the diplomatic one, since it dates back to Japan's signing of the Svalbard Treaty in 1920. However, this pillar had been dormant until recent years. In July 2009, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA) officially submitted its offer to be a permanent Observer to the Arctic Council. In March 2013, MoFA appointed an ambassador in charge of Arctic affairs. As a result of various diplomatic efforts, Japan was admitted to Observer status of the Arctic Council in May 2013.

The most substantial engagement was conducted in the pillar of science. Both the National Institute of Polar Research and Marine Science and Technology Center (now called the Agency for Marine-Earth Science and Technology) have been the main organs which conducted observational research in the Arctic since the beginning of the 1990s. More recently, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology inaugurated the five-year GRENE Arctic

Climate Change Research Project 2011-2015, which was succeeded by the Arctic Challenge for Sustainability Project 2015-2019 (ArCS).¹

The less emphasized but embracing huge potential is the pillar of business. The pilot case was the Kalaallit Nunaat Marine Seismic (KANUMAS) project 1990-1962.² More recently, the Japanese government showed interest in the utilization of the Northern Sea Route (NSR). The Ministry of Land, Infrastructure and Transport (MLIT) performed feasibility research on shipping and logistics through the NSR for the private sector including shipping companies, trading companies, and electric power companies. MLIT organizes a Public-Private Partnership Council for the Northern Sea Route.

When the government adopted the second version of the Basic Plan on Ocean Policy in April 2013, the Arctic-related measures among others were for the first time installed at the Cabinet level.³ Although most such measures were not brand-new, what was unprecedented was that it instituted two primordial linkages among the three pillars: to utilize the pillar of science for the pillar of business, and to make efficient use of the pillar of diplomacy for the pillar of science.⁴

In an attempt to pursue a more developed and comprehensive Arctic policy promoting full-fledged interests for Japanese stakeholders such as governmental agencies, academic communities and industries, the Japanese government is now drafting an Arctic policy document including facilitation of observational research, promotion of international cooperation, utilization of the NSR, and securing safety navigation and national interests. Japan's new Arctic policy document is scheduled to be announced at some point within this year.

To conclude, Japan will show its flag in the Arctic more clearly, and thus we watch a true sunrise at hand.

Notes

1. For more information on the ArCS, see the following website.
http://www.mext.go.jp/english/research_development/ (accessed August 24, 2015).
2. The KANUMAS project was an international seismic reconnaissance survey off the eastern and western coasts of northern Greenland. The Japan National Oil Corporation (now called Japan Oil, Gas and Metal National Corporation, or JOGMEC) joined the project as a member of the major oil companies (BP, ExxonMobil, Shell, Statoil and Texaco) in addition to Nunaoil, the Greenlandic oil company, as a key operating partner. Each of them was admitted a preferential exploration position in the areas covered by the seismic surveys.

3. The 2013 Basic Plan on Ocean Policy was the second action plan for the 2007 Basic Act on Ocean Policy, following the 2008 Basic Plan. The Headquarters for Ocean Policy led by the Prime Minister functions as a composer coordinating and arranging interests related to various marine issues among several ministries.
4. Ohnishi, *op.cit.*, pp. 200-201.