

Asian Foreign Policy in a Changing Arctic

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Asian Foreign Policy in a Changing Arctic

The Diplomacy of Economy and Science
at New Frontiers

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To my family

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PREFACE

On 9 December 2013, after flying five hours from Copenhagen, I set foot inside the Arctic Circle for the first time in my life. I had arrived at Kangerlussuaq Airport, a former US Air Base and now a civilian airport in Greenland. As I came out from the plane, in the distance I saw enormous flattop rocky mountains surrounding the airport. It was December—everything, virtually everything, was white. The scenery very much fitted what I imagined as the Arctic.

From there, we took another flight to the capital of Greenland, Nuuk, which lies outside of the Arctic Circle. Although still bitterly cold, it was a beautiful small town with colourful little houses. In Nuuk, I was given an opportunity to give a lecture on Japan's Arctic policy and its relation to Greenland.

The next morning, I stood in front of the audience that filled up a large hall at Ilisimatusarfik, the University of Greenland. They were mostly ethnic Greenlanders interested in knowing more about Asia—university students, lecturers, business owners, government officials, and politicians alike. As I stood to begin my talk, I felt a strange sense of comfort as I looked around at their faces—they looked so much like me. This was very different from my usual experience of going abroad for work (or living in Denmark for that matter), where I am used to seeing different faces of different colours. I knew the Inuits were what we know as Mongoloids, like me, a Japanese, but I could not quite process that, somehow, at a place so far away from Japan or East Asia, we were somehow connected.

This happened at a time of much media debate around the idea that “China is coming to the Arctic.” Citizens (mostly non-Inuits) in the

Arctic coastal states appeared to feel threatened by the idea that the new, economically, and militarily powerful force (a new ‘yellow peril’) might be coming to their backyard, possibly with negative consequences for its pristine environment. After many years of tensions in the Arctic Region through the Cold War, the existing multi-layered governance system of the Region centred on the Arctic Council appeared to keep the Region in peace. So what good could come from letting these Asian so-called newcomers in? They are not from here and they don’t understand the Arctic anyway. These were opinions I heard during this period and, as an Asian person living and working in an Arctic coastal state, they were uncomfortably reminiscent of “Japan bashing” that I witnessed while living in California during Japan’s peak of economic dominance during the 1980s and early 1990s.

A few months later, I happened to hear that one member of the Greenlandic delegation to China had a similar experience in China: “we Greenlanders think and act very similar to East Asians.” Psychological analysis aside, I could not quite ignore this difference between the distance we feel about the Arctic via a political, conceptual construct and a more human-to-human interactions. Do we really know what is happening in the Arctic? Do we know what the ultimate goals of the Asian states are in the Arctic?

The term “Arctic” has many meanings. For instance, Arctic Studies can deal with the natural environment (ice, ocean, air, etc.), cultural, social, political, and environmental issues, or indigenous peoples. My small piece of this big Arctic puzzle will be from the perspective of international relations and political economy. In this book, I attempt to introduce how Asians view the Arctic by addressing the questions of “What role does Arctic policy have for Asian states?” and “Where do Asian states’ Arctic policies lie within their overall foreign policy?”

This book begins by examining the context of the changing Arctic, the existing framework of Arctic governance, and the background of Asian states’ “arrival” to the Arctic Region, as well as associated reactions. I will also introduce the concept of economic diplomacy, which I use in this study. Chapters 2–6 examine in detail the profiles and domestic politics of China, Japan, South Korea, Singapore, and India. The final chapter draws comparisons and lessons from these five case studies of Asian foreign policy towards the Arctic Region.

Some years have passed since the initial media hype and the eventual entry of Asian states to the Arctic Council as Observers, and this book hopefully contains the follow-up on the new Asian observers since becoming fully fledged members of the Arctic community. Moreover, this book is one of the few books on the subject written by a single author, which gives a coherent analysis throughout the book. My viewpoints as a Japanese scholar living in Denmark and working at a Nordic institute give a unique angle to the discussion as well.

In that regard, I am extremely grateful for my current employer, the Nordic Institute of Asian Studies at the Department of Political Science, University of Copenhagen, for the opportunity and encouragement to work on this exciting topic. I owe my gratitude to the Nordic Council of Ministers, the Scandinavia-Japan Sasakawa Foundation, and the Asian Dynamics Initiative at the University of Copenhagen for generous grants to help fund this study. I became a believer in the Nordic construct, and I hope this book is one example of “nordisk nytte” (Nordic value).

I wish to thank many people who were helpful to my research and who read and commented on my work. The scholars of Asian studies deserve my deepest gratitude: Anne-Marie Brady, Cheng Baozhi, Jong Kun Choi, Christopher M. Dent, Geir Helgesen, Glenn D. Hook, Yang Jiang, Marc Lanteigne, Tedong Lee, Liu Chunrong, Outi Luova, Paul Midford, Jonas Parello-Plesner, Marie Söderberg, Kai Sun, Vijay Sakhuja, and Atsushi Sunami.

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A sign post showing distances from the research town Ny-Ålesund in Svalbard, Norway. Photo provided by the National Institute of Polar Research, Japan.

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