



**S. RAJARATNAM SCHOOL
OF INTERNATIONAL STUDIES**
A Graduate School of Nanyang Technological University

RSIS COMMENTARIES

RSIS Commentaries are intended to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy relevant background and analysis of contemporary developments. The views of the authors are their own and do not represent the official position of the S.Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced electronically or in print with prior permission from RSIS. Due recognition must be given to the author or authors and RSIS. Please email: RSISPublication@ntu.edu.sg or call (+65) 6790 6982 to speak to the Editor RSIS Commentaries, Yang Razali Kassim.

No. 229/2013 dated 17 December 2013

Asian States in the Arctic: Opportunities and Environmental Changes

By Per Erik Solli

Synopsis

Several Asian states recently became permanent observers to the Arctic Council. Asian states have an interest in commercial opportunities and resources in the Arctic. Environmental changes in the Arctic may cause extreme weather patterns and sea level rise, including in Asia.

Commentary

INDIA, CHINA, Japan, South Korea, and Singapore became permanent observers to the Arctic Council in May 2013. A number of organisations and non-Arctic European states were observers already. With the recent expansion the Arctic Council evolved into a more global entity with the inclusion of the Asian states whose interests in the Arctic are similar to those of others.

North-American, European and Asian states and organisations conduct research in the Arctic to assess the local and global impact of environmental changes. Some actors also have an interest in the resources and commercial opportunities in the Arctic. The Asian states are not Arctic newcomers though cast as such by the media prior to the Arctic Council meeting earlier this year.

High north, low tension

Asian states have been participating in international scientific research in polar areas. Japan established polar research stations in Antarctica in 1957 and in the Arctic in 1991. China, Korea and India also have polar research stations and many Asian states have polar research vessels.

Although less common now than five years ago, "Race for the Arctic" and the "New Cold War" remain regular newspaper headlines when it comes to coverage of Arctic affairs. In popular media, the Arctic is often portrayed as a zone of potential conflict with unresolved boundary issues, rapidly changing sea ice cover and tempting natural resources forming a potentially explosive political cocktail. Actually the region possesses a strong track record of post-Cold War peace and stability.

The Arctic is used by some politicians to promote nationalism and self-esteem. Bold pronouncements on the Arctic, like Canada's recent statement implying a claim to the North Pole and Russia's announcement of the reopening of military bases in the Arctic, are often intended for domestic audiences and do not alter the cooperative arrangements between Arctic states.

The post-Cold War cooperative discussion led to the creation of the Barents Euro-Arctic Council, the Barents Regional Council, the Northern Forum and the Arctic Council. The five Arctic coastal states Canada, Greenland/Denmark, Norway, Russia and the United States signed the Ilulissat Declaration in 2008 stating that existing global maritime legal framework, the UN Convention on the Law of the Seas (UNCLOS), is also applicable to the Arctic Ocean and its littoral waters.

Russia and Norway ended a 40-year long boundary dispute and signed a treaty in 2010 to resolve their overlapping maritime claims in the Barents Sea. A recent development is the signing of a Russia-US ministerial agreement to enhance inter-regional cooperation between the Far-East federal district and Alaska. Search and rescue plus oil spill preparedness agreements have been signed at the Arctic Council ministerial meetings in 2011 and 2013 respectively. These safety-related agreements can be seen as measures to meet the current and anticipated future increase of commercial and civilian activity in the Arctic.

The Arctic may be a promising area for commercial opportunities. The Northern Sea Route is already open part of the year. There are also substantial petroleum and mineral reserves in the Arctic. However, analysts have recently addressed several factors dampening more optimistic future predictions. Operations in the Arctic environment can be complex, difficult and costly. Profitability of commercial ventures in the Arctic may be influenced by the dynamics in the global market itself and evolving concepts for production and distribution.

Asian actors and others may pursue commercial interests in the Arctic. UNCLOS guarantees transit shipping rights for non-Arctic actors through the Arctic Ocean. Most of the resources in the Arctic are in national sovereign areas, offshore and onshore, but are extracted by a mix of national and international companies and are available through normal commercial mechanisms. Asian companies are already involved in these ventures.

A freezing cold climate warming up

Global warming has an early and immediate effect in the polar regions. Less ice in the Arctic Ocean is already enabling transit shipping between the Pacific and Atlantic oceans parts of the year and possibly the whole year in the long-term. International scientific research programmes are assessing the ice retraction and other environmental changes. The white ice/snow surface in the polar regions normally reflects energy from the sun. The shrinking ice surface in the Arctic results in less reflection, warmer water temperatures and further acceleration of ice melting.

The release of methane gas from polar areas is a factor contributing to further climate change. Due to melting permafrost and ice the previously trapped gas pocket are released into the atmosphere in substantial volumes. Ocean acidification caused by absorption of CO₂ is another concern. Changes in the Arctic may affect the pattern of prevailing warm/cold global ocean currents and global seasonal wind patterns. All of these factors may contribute to non-traditional security challenges:

Changes in the polar regions may influence global extreme weather phenomena and seasonal weather patterns. Changing weather patterns may possibly impact annual agricultural production, also in Asia. Ice melting in polar areas and sea level rise may in worst case scenarios have devastating effects on low-lying coastal areas globally, but the impact may be felt disproportionately in equatorial regions, including Singapore.

Colonel Per Erik Solli is a Visiting Fellow at the Institute for Defence and Strategic Studies at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University. He is a Senior Military Adviser at the Norwegian Institute for International Affairs (NUPI) and has been a member of a project team at NUPI researching Asian interests and agendas in the Arctic.