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Understanding the Role of the North Pacific in *Canada's Arctic Foreign Policy*

Marc Lanteigne
Network Coordinator

This month's release of Canada's Arctic Foreign Policy document, the first since 2019, has garnered much attention both for its tonal shift compared with previous statements. This was due to it placing a far stronger emphasis on military security concerns, as well as the inclusion of several new elements, including tying the Arctic more directly with adjacent policies covering Europe and Asia. The importance of the latter region to Canadian Arctic strategies was well illustrated by descriptions of the 'North Pacific' in the new document, marking the first time this region has featured so prominently in Ottawa's formal Arctic discourse. Foreign Minister Mélanie Joly stated in her introduction of the Arctic document that it was partially designed to complement Ottawa's *Indo-Pacific Strategy*, which had been updated in September this year, as well as the June 2023 *Future of Diplomacy* discussion paper which noted the shift in global economic and political power towards the Asia-Pacific.[1]

The rationale behind the inclusion of the North Pacific in the new *Arctic Foreign Policy* can best be described in two ways. First, Canada, as with other NATO members, has begun to express concerns that Arctic security will be adversely affected by China, and specifically the Beijing's closer strategic cooperation with the Russian Federation. Arctic security thus cannot be restricted to the far North Atlantic alone. Second, Ottawa is seeking to reach out to Asia-Pacific regional friends who have also developed Arctic policies, namely Japan and South Korea, who share Canada's preferences for a 'rules-based order' in the Arctic. On both fronts, the Canadian government will have its work cut out for it.

For more than a decade, China has been seeking to widen and deepen its Arctic policies to increase its political and economic presence in the far north as well as to be widely accepted as an Arctic stakeholder despite having no territory there. In addition to developing the *de facto* northern wing of the Belt and Road Initiative, with considerable Russian assistance, in the form of the Polar Silk Road after 2017, Beijing has also designated the Polar Regions as a 'strategic new frontier' (*zhanlüe xin jiangyu* 战略新疆域), in keeping with constructing an identity as a 'near Arctic state' (*jin beiji guojia* 近北极国家).[2] Since becoming an observer in the Arctic Council in 2013, the Chinese government had originally sought to walk a fine line between being accepted as a regional partner while also ensuring it would not be pushed out of what it saw as an emerging area of economic importance.[3] However, more recently, and especially since the full Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Beijing has adopted a much more security-oriented approach to the Arctic. The Xi Jinping government has declined to join the Western-led sanctions regime against Russia, and has continued to work with Russian interests towards developing the Northern Sea Route as a future trade conduit. Of greater concern in North America is that the Chinese government is becoming less restrained about pursuing greater military cooperation with Russia in the far north.

Although there remain considerable limits to the strategic trust between China and Russia in the Arctic,[4] both powers have engaged in a growing number of controlled regional military and civilian cooperation in northern waters over the past two years. The April 2023 memorandum of understanding signed between the China Coast Guard and Russia's FSB Border Guard Service led to much debate over whether there would be joint policing patrols in the Arctic Ocean. In October this year, as Beijing was marking the 75th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic, it was reported that two Chinese Coast Guard vessels, the *Meishan* and the *Xiushan*, had accompanied Russian ships to (or near) the Arctic Ocean, amid bilateral calls for closer bilateral 'far seas' (*yuanyang* 远洋) cooperation.[5] In April 2024, the Chinese and Russian navies penned an agreement to develop stronger cooperation in maritime search and rescue operations, although again it was unclear whether this deal would extend to the Arctic.[6]

Far less obscure in nature has been the growing number of joint Sino-Russian military manoeuvres close to the Alaskan coast, which have alarmed North American authorities and have been clearly designed as a loud signal to the US and Canada. Both powers' naval vessels had been encroaching closer to Alaskan waters in recent years, and in July of this year Chinese PLA Navy ships were spotted off the Aleutian Islands, reportedly conducting 'freedom of navigation operations.' Then an escalation of sorts took place the following month when two Chinese H-6 bomber planes, accompanying two Russian bombers, were spotted by American and Canadian fighters, again off Alaska.[7] The result was a considerable volume rise in discussions over whether the North Pacific was fast becoming a new front in Arctic great power rivalries.

In addition to the overall deteriorated state of Sino-Canadian relations during the last half-decade, Chinese policymakers and commentators have frequently sought to portray Canada as complicit in militarising the Arctic and joining other NATO states in a regressive 'cold war mentality' (*lengzhan siwei* 冷战思维) towards the region at a time when international cooperation to combat local climate change was essential.[8] This has been in keeping with Chinese discourses which have painted NATO, not Moscow, as ultimately responsible for the deteriorated security situation in the far north. To give another recent example, in a 2024 Chinese academic study of Canadian Arctic security policy, Ottawa was described as having abandoned its venerable policy emphasis on Arctic social development in favour of a hard military agenda, due to the 'Ukraine crisis' (*Wukelan weiji* 乌克兰危机) as well as growing American pressure, and rejecting regional science diplomacy which could act as a needed communications conduit with Russia. The article concluded that Canada's growing zero-sum perceptions of Arctic security, based on a preference for alliances over regional community-building, and deference to American policy, would inevitably contribute to the far north's strategic instability.[9] Thus, when assessing the potential risks China's Arctic policies pose to Canada, it is necessary to also examine the production of alternative narratives regarding Canadian Arctic interests.

China itself was featured prominently in Canada's Arctic Foreign Policy document, including citing Beijing's search for resources via the Polar Silk Road, engaging in scientific projects which would be considered 'dual use' with potential military aspects, and deepening strategic cooperation with Moscow, with the Vladimir Putin regime cited as 'opening its Arctic' to China's entry. The Chinese Embassy in Ottawa decried Canada's 'so-called Arctic Foreign Policy' (*suowei de beiji waijiao zhengce* 所谓的“北极外交政策”) as a misinterpretation and distortion of Chinese Arctic interests, noting that 'Arctic affairs are not only about the Arctic countries,' but are the concern of the entire global community.[10] Other Chinese media read the policy paper as further evidence that Western states were seeking to inflate a Sino-Russian Arctic threat in order to further their own strategic agendas in the region and contain China, and also that Canada was seeking to more overtly align with American Arctic militarization to gain favour with the incoming Donald Trump administration in Washington.[11] It is not an accident that the Canadian Arctic Policy document also included the need to guard against disinformation and interference, including in the digital realm.

In seeking to approach Japan and South Korea for deepened Arctic partnerships, Ottawa is seeking to build upon existing Indo-Pacific relations with the two states and to recognize their governments' own emerging Arctic concerns. Like China, Japan and Korea became observers in the Arctic Council in 2013, and along with India and Singapore are widely viewed as members of an 'Asia-Arctic' bloc with growing economic concerns in the far north. Japan's 2015 Arctic White Paper cited the far north as a national security concern over fears about intensified military and economic competition,[12] which include the potential interdiction of the Northern Sea Route due to Sino-Russian domination. Tokyo has also been interested in being accepted as a research and scientific player in polar affairs. The Japan Agency for Marine-Earth Science and Technology (JAMSTEC) is overseeing construction of the country's first Arctic research vessel, the *Mirai II* (みらい II) scheduled for completion in late 2026, (Japan's Maritime Self-Defence Force also operates an icebreaking vessel, the *Shirase* (しらせ).[13] The Japanese government has also expressed specific concerns about maintaining international law in the Arctic and preserving the openness of emerging maritime sea routes in the Arctic, especially out of concerns that military activities in the North Pacific will negatively impact future Japanese sea trade.[14]

South Korea has also sought to become a centre of research on the Arctic, and its northern strategies have reflected interests in economic cooperation and multilateral diplomacy.[15] The country's Arctic Master Plan, published by Seoul in 2013, which detailed interests in the development of the Arctic economy, encouraging regional scientific prowess, and participation in relevant regimes including the Arctic Council, in accordance with Seoul's 'middle power' status. These themes were elucidated in the Korean government's follow-up document in 2019, which stressed environmental cooperation in addition to knowledge sharing. Korea is also a player in maritime shipping, and like Japan is also eyeing the financial potential of the Northern Sea Route.[16] Since 2016, there have been halting attempts to develop a Trilateral High-Level Dialogue on the Arctic between China, Japan, and South Korea,[17] but tangible agreements from this arrangement have been sparse, due mainly to geopolitical strains in Northeast Asia.

Canada’s next move will be therefore how to best engage Japan and Korea in Arctic dialogues, addressing mutual concerns about regional environmental threats while ensuring that the North Pacific remains an area of open navigation. This will likely require a multilevel approach, making use of many different areas of expertise from all three states, as well as exploring how Japan and Korea can continue to contribute to Arctic discourses as the future of the Arctic Council remains clouded. Although Ottawa has stressed the importance of Arctic sovereignty for Canada and other Arctic states, there needs to be a continued discussion of how non-Arctic friends can contribute to securing the region, economically, environmentally and strategically.

As Canada’s new *Arctic Foreign Policy* Paper stated, ‘the North Pacific as part of Canada’s neighbourhood. The North Pacific, through the Bering Strait, is one of the key approaches to the North American Arctic. Canada must not undervalue the strategic importance of these approaches.’ Now that the North Pacific has been linked more formally to Canadian Arctic policy, there is great potential for Ottawa to expand its diplomacy in Northeast Asia as the Arctic becomes more of an international dilemma.

***Marc Lanteigne** is a professor of Political Science at UiT – The Arctic University of Norway, Tromsø, an Adjunct Lecturer at Ilisimatusarfik – University of Greenland, Nuuk, and editor of the Arctic news blog Over the Circle.*

Endnotes

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