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Rising Sun Over the Arctic: Japan's Arctic Journey from North Pacific Hegemon to Democratic Polar Partner

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Introduction

As the Arctic and adjacent "near-Arctic"[201] remilitarize and old Cold War fault lines between East and West re-remerge as salient boundaries defining new blocs of increasing mutually exclusive cooperation and strategic alignment, it's not just NATO that's rethinking the strategic foundations for a secure polar world in response to Russia's military resurgence underway for over a decade now, culminating with its full scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Across the Pacific from NATO's North American member states (Canada, America, and

[201] A term famously and controversially introduced by China in its January 2018 Arctic policy white paper, which when applied not just to China but also other Arctic-adjacent states like Japan loses all of its controversy and joins the pantheon of useful geopolitical terms for our increasingly fractious world. The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, "China's Arctic Policy," White Paper, January 26, 2018.

Denmark – owing to its sovereign possession of Greenland), the states of Northeast Asia are also rethinking the foundations of Arctic security for their evolving Arctic policies, keeping pace with a fundamental geopolitical transformation of the region with roots that date as far back, ironically, as the Arctic Council's 2013 cooperative expansion to include among its new non-Arctic observer states five Asian countries (Japan, China, South Korea, Singapore and India), which in a short time have brought forth contending and at times contradictory visions of the Arctic order.

While the circumpolar world continued to talk the talk of circumpolar cooperation and the endurance of Arctic exceptionalism, new cracks emerged and spread, as Russia's resurgence strained and later shattered first the post-World War II and then the post-Cold War peace enjoyed for decades in Europe, and then China's rise and increasing alignment with an increasingly anti-western Russia further strained and helped to shatter the regional calm and mutual commitment to circumpolar cooperation that had defined the spirit of the Arctic Council during its first quarter century from 1996-2021. Japan, as both a neighbor of China with a mutual interest in increasing Arctic engagement, a

neighbor of Russia with an unresolved sovereignty dispute over Russia's continued occupation of the southern Kurils since they fell to Moscow during the final days of World War II, and an ally of the West with a mutual interest in nurturing and securing the democratic world, has had to walk a delicate walk. Especially since Russia's full scale invasion of Ukraine and consequent tightening of the strategic alignment between Beijing and Moscow (itself a result of the West's unified stance against Russia's aggression), Japan, along with its neighbors and fellow stakeholders at the Arctic Council, has been forced by necessity to acknowledge that the Arctic has become increasingly divided as GPC displaces circumpolar cooperation as the predominant paradigm in Arctic diplomacy.

Past as Prologue: Imperial Echoes Help Re-frame an Increasingly Contested and Divided Arctic

While unfamiliar territory for many Arctic and near-Arctic stakeholders, Japan has itself experienced its own long, dynamic sovereign journey as a northern (and briefly Arctic) power, and at the height of its empire in World War II was

the predominant military power in the High North Pacific and Bering Sea; during its year-long possession of the outer Aleutian Islands, Japan was a *bona fide* polar power – capping a century of expanding into territories hitherto held by Russia and before 1991 the Soviet Union in what is widely described as "the Russian Far East," but which increasingly became Japanese-held territory from the middle of the 19th century through to nearly the middle of the 20th. Japan's experiences during this stretch of historic northward territorial and maritime expansion thus inform its (and can therefore inform our) understanding of the current GPC dynamics in the region today, as can its experiences as a whaling nation, whose enduring whale harvesting economic and culture provides Japan with further touch points for mutual understanding with Arctic nations and peoples with whom it stands united as a contemporary whaling nation. Additionally, Japan's northernmost major island, Hokkaido, is the traditional homeland of the Ainu indigenous people, who have in recent years made noted gains in restoring the indigenous rights, mirroring those of their counterparts in the Arctic states to an increasing degree – providing Japan with an additional layer of understanding and engagement

with the indigenous peoples of the Arctic, and the states with whom they have developed to varying degrees a collaborative and distinctive form of sovereignty. These perspectives help to inform and contextualize Japan's past, present and future as a northern state with growing Arctic interests, and, in many ways, an inherent *Arcticness* that positions it well for the coming years of an increasingly contested Arctic just as it did the past ten years of a more universally cooperative circumpolar Arctic.

World War II in the Pacific ended just over 80 years ago with Japan's August 15, 1945 historic acceptance of surrender. Announced by the Emperor of Japan in his very first radio broadcast to his nation, it was a broadcast that would never be forgotten – and one which almost never happened, as militarists tried in vain to seize the recording as part of an ill-conceived and little supported coup. But with the broadcast proceeding as planned, Japan's stunning and complete fall from the heights of its great power expansion in prior decades since its navy defeated Russia in 1905, paving the way for its expansion first to Manchuria and Korea, and then as far north as Sakhalin island, and the Kuril island chain before turning its military attention to the subjugation of Southeast Asia and Oceania.

Japan's defeat also brought an end to Tokyo's bid to become a polar power which took form with its invasion and occupation of the outer Aleutian Islands, which denied the United States marine access to Japan's side of the international date line in the North Pacific and Bering Sea. With its eventual expulsion from the Aleutians, the four southern-most Kuril Islands (Japan's northern territories, the islands of Etorofu, Kunashiri, Shikotan, and the Habomai), were soon invaded and occupied by Soviet Russia, which also seized Japan's territorial possession on south Sakhalin Island by force. Japan controlled south Sakhalin from 1855–1875 under the Treaty of Shimoda, with the Kurils similarly partitioned, after which Tokyo exchanged south Sakhalin for control over the northern Kurils with Moscow under the Treaty of Saint Petersburg, only to win back control over south Sakhalin after its victory in the 1905 Russo-Japanese War, along with fishing rights off Kamchatka.

Japan's remote Alaska garrisons in the outer Aleutian Islands had been fully reconquered two years before its World War II surrender by a joint US-Canadian liberation force assembled methodically (and with sufficient mass to dislodge

the isolated Japanese occupiers) in the North Pacific waters off North America's west coast, the first of long and bloody island-hopping campaign that severed Japan's tenuously overstretched naval sea lines of communications (SLOCs), ultimately cutting off Japan's under-defended main islands from its naval forces and its overseas (and in many cases, still undefeated) armies occupying much of the Asia-Pacific. This far less often evoked (and some argue, largely forgotten) collapse of Japan's northern foothold in Alaska marked both the beginning of the end (in the Aleutians) and end of the end (in Sakhalin and the Kurils) of the Pacific War, reversing Japan's breathtaking imperial expansion in the preceding years, a campaign described aptly by Ira Wintermute in August 1943 as "War in the Fog," as much for the impact of the North's infamous weather as for its many frictional consequences of the fog of war.[202] From the restoration of U.S. sovereignty over the island of Kiska in Alaska's Aleutian Islands chain on August 15, 1943 to the Emperor's dramatic surrender

[202] Barry Zellen, "War in the Fog: Historical Memory, the Fog of War, and Unforgetting the Aleutians War," *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs* 22, No. 2 (2021): 193–199; Ira Wintermute, "War in the Fog," *American Magazine*, August 1943, p2.

announcement two years later to the day, a determined, bloody and successful island-hopping campaign would transpire from the frigid waters of the Aleutians to the tropical waters of the South Pacific.

The historic importance of the war in the Aleutians cannot be overstated and its geopolitical linkage to the broader Pacific War offers insights for the contemporary world its return to the Arctic of great power competition (GPC) and the specter of both remilitarization (under way) and war (long considered improbable if not outright impossible, but now considered possible if not yet probable). With growing global geostrategic interest in the Arctic and near-Arctic regions, fueled in part by the accelerating polar thaw and its concomitant opening of new sea lanes running through and near the Aleutians gateway into the narrow Bering Strait – a vulnerable chokepoint that could, if threatened by the after effects of intensifying Arctic GPC, greatly dampen enthusiasm for polar shipping – the lessons of the Alaskan and High North Pacific battles that ultimately forced Japan's final retreat to within its pre-expansion borders, and which restored American sovereignty over all of Alaska while facilitating the Soviet Union's lightning expansion

during World War II's final hours (and even beyond the surrender) to within sight of Hokkaido (with plans, ultimately left unimplemented, for either the conquest or partial north/south partition of the island), are particularly salient once more, and can help us contextualize and re-frame Japan's historic role as a geopolitical spoiler that successfully disrupted and diminished the capacity of both the United States and Soviet Russia to project power into the Arctic and North Pacific – a role some speculate that China now looks to emulate.[203]

As Lamazhapov and Østhagen describe: "In 2024, China inched closer to its dream of superpower status. During the span of a few months, Chinese bombers were identified off the coast of Alaska, the Chinese Coast Guard entered the Arctic Ocean via the Bering Strait, and the Chinese Navy kept exercising in the Bering Sea. These activities are not only one-off signaling maneuvers meant to irk Washington. They are also a sign of things to come."[204] As they further describe: "China's increased presence in the Pacific Arctic should spur

[203] Erdem Lamazhapov and Andreas Østhagen, "Alaska, Not Greenland, Should Worry the United States in the Arctic," *The Arctic Institute*, October 28, 2025.
[204] Ibid.

the Trump administration's further focus on Arctic security issues in that spatial domain. The increasing military activities of China centred around the Eastern Arctic region are a strategic and symbolic signaling off the coast of Alaska, and represent a move to support Russia in its Arctic standoff with the U.S. … it is not the geographic proximity between those two countries that is driving concerns over great power rivalry. Rather, it is Russia's growing dependency on China that is the underlying cause for concern."[205]

And in time – albeit not imminently likely – a newly aggressive and nationalistic Japan could potentially reprise this historic role should this Northeast Asian and North Pacific gateway to the Arctic via the Northern Sea Route ever enter into a period of intensifying geopolitical instability.[206] Samara Choudhury discounts the likelihood of a renewal of armed confrontation between Tokyo and Moscow over the islands' sovereignty, given Russia's status as a nuclear power and Putin's recent

[205] Erdem Lamazhapov and Andreas Østhagen, "Alaska, Not Greenland, Should Worry the United States in the Arctic," *The Arctic Institute*, October 28, 2025.
[206] Samara Choudhury, "A Dispute for the Decades: The Russo-Japanese Struggle for the Kuril Islands," *Harvard International Review*, December 5, 2024.

re-militarization of the islands.[207] Choudhury believes it remains "unlikely that the conflict will be resolved in the near future. The ambiguity surrounding control over the islands only allows for tensions to rise."[208] But quite interestingly, the Kuril dispute has its own curious and potentially significant interconnections with the Ukraine War: "On October 7, 2022, Ukrainian President Volodymr Zelensky signed a decree formally recognizing the Kuril Islands as a Japanese territory temporarily occupied by Russia, likely as a sign of solidarity with another Russian-occupied country. Russia has since used infrastructure from the Kuril Islands in the war against Ukraine, transferring some anti-aircraft missile defense systems from the islands to Ukraine. Additionally, approximately 60 percent of the population of the Kuril Islands is descended from Ukrainians forcibly moved to the

[207] Described in detail by Ike Barrash, "Russia's Militarization of the Kuril Islands," *Center for Strategic & International Studies Blog*, September 27, 2022, and cited by Samara Choudhury, "A Dispute for the Decades: The Russo-Japanese Struggle for the Kuril Islands," *Harvard International Review*, December 5, 2024.
[208] Samara Choudhury, "A Dispute for the Decades: The Russo-Japanese Struggle for the Kuril Islands," *Harvard International Review*, December 5, 2024.

archipelago by the USSR after it seized the islands in 1945."[209]

While Japan remains a loyal Pacific ally of the United States and a vital offshore launching pad for the projection of military power throughout Northeast Asia, Washington has remained largely disengaged from Japan's Kuril Island dispute with Russia.[210] Moreover, Hokkaido remains far less integrated with American military power as compared to Okinawa in Japan's south (and importantly, proximate to Taiwan) – but as the Arctic becomes increasingly re-militarized with fears it may one day again be contested, Hokkaido is where Japan continues to face off against Russia over these disputed islands – and where the restoration of Japanese sovereignty over the four southernmost Kurils remains a simmering sovereignty dispute that could, in time, fester into a future flashpoint of conflict – positioning its adjacent waters, and in particular the 26-mile Soya (also known as La Pérouse) Strait between Hokkaido and Sakhalin connecting the Sea of Japan

[209] Samara Choudhury, "A Dispute for the Decades: The Russo-Japanese Struggle for the Kuril Islands," *Harvard International Review*, December 5, 2024.
[210] Ibid.

(and the major ports of Korea and the Russian Far East) to the Sea of Okhotsk, a vulnerable chokepoint that could jeopardize Northern Sea Route shipping between ports of Northeast Asia and their counterparts in Europe. While Soya has far less vessel traffic than the Tsugaru Strait between Hokkaido and the main island of Honshu, so long as Hokkaido remains uncontested, it will remain less vulnerable to external disruption than other vulnerable straits – but in the event the simmering sovereignty dispute over Japan's northern territories should escalate into a diplomatic and/or military crisis, control over this northern strait separating contested insular territories and their surrounding waters could become a new flashpoint for Russo-Japanese conflict in a replay of an earlier sovereignty class in these very same insular territories and waters at the start of the previous century – a clash that planted the seeds of GPC that would eventually erupt into the Pacific War of World War II.

The Fog of Near-Arctic Warfare: Lessons of the Aleutians War

On June 3, 1942, the imperial Japanese navy launched carrier raids on Dutch Harbor, Alaska, and

in the days that followed, invaded and occupied the islands of Attu and Kiska in Alaska's outer Aleutians, 847 and 671 miles, respectively, to the west of Dutch (itself another 796 miles from Anchorage). The bombardment of Dutch was believed at the time to be Tokyo's opening move in a wider campaign to establish a foothold on the Alaska mainland from which to expand and project power deeper into the Pacific Northwest, one successfully-thwarted by prescient U.S. efforts to fortify the region near Dutch in the months that followed the attack on Pearl Harbor.[211] More recent scholarship suggests that Japan aimed less for a beachhead on North America than to distract war planners with a feint in the hope of dividing the U.S. fleet – with their ultimate goal being victory at Midway. Whether Tokyo's grander ambitions for War in Alaska were thwarted by an unexpectedly-vigorous defense at Dutch, or it intended from the get-go to clear and hold only the outer Aleutians limits, its year-long occupation of Attu and Kiska became the first and only Japanese occupations of North American territory during the war. And in the end, while America was not unduly

[211] U.S. Coast Guard Historical Section, Public Information Division (1946). *The Coast Guard at War*, Vol III, Alaska, February 15, 1946, pp. 65-69.

distracted by this challenging northern "war in the fog" (as aptly described below by Ira Wintermute in 1946[212]) the counteroffensive did absorb a significant amount of troops, ships, and weapons. Indeed, to support the inevitable counter-invasion of the Aleutians, and successfully dislodge its Japanese garrison, Jeremy McKenzie points out how, "During World War II, the Arctic was an important, albeit ancillary, theater, which is perhaps best illustrated by the 8,500 Japanese troops stationed in the Aleutian Islands, prompting deployment of four hundred thousand US troops to Alaska."[213]

While America's only loss of North American soil to imperial Japan, its invasion and occupation of the outer Aleutians that followed the bombing of Dutch was one of multiple assaults upon remote U.S. Pacific insular territories, and the second upon an incorporated U.S. territory on a trajectory that

[212] Barry Zellen, "War in the Fog: Historical Memory, the Fog of War, and Unforgetting the Aleutians War," *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs* 22, No. 2 (2021), pp. 193–199; Ira Wintermute, "War in the Fog. *American Magazine*," August 1943, p2.
[213] Jeremy McKenzie, "Beyond Icebreakers: The United States Needs a Bold New Approach to Arctic Security Equipping in an Era Strategic Competition," Modern War Institute Blog, August 7, 2025.

would ultimately lead to statehood. The Aleutians invasion was preceded by that previous December's near-simultaneous assaults by Japan on the unincorporated U.S. territories of the Philippines and Guam, and the incorporated territory of Hawaii. Its conquest of the Aleutians can be viewed as history's first war for control of this increasingly important Arctic gateway linking the Pacific to the Bering Sea, the Arctic and beyond that, to Europe itself.

When viewed through the lens of grand strategy, Japan's multiple assaults upon U.S. Pacific insular territories from Guam to Kiska, Alaska may well have been calibrated with intended precision by war planners in Tokyo, in their hope that by avoiding a direct strike upon the U.S. mainland and physically occupying territories only on the far side of the antemeridian, around which the international date line zigs and zags, a threshold could be asserted, and perhaps respected by both sides throughout their long Pacific clash, with an eventual peace dividing the Pacific into two separate spheres of influence. Tokyo may well have designed both its Alaska and Hawaii strikes to hit the United States outside its constitutional core, much the way it attacked colonial possessions in British Malaya,

French Indochina and the Dutch East Indies – gaining territories that distant colonial powers might be prepared to surrender without a wholehearted fight – as the British, French and Dutch to a large degree did, with the British evacuation of Singapore and abandonment of the entire Malay Peninsula while it still held control of vital strategic chokepoints and commanded a materially superior armed force particularly noteworthy and to many inexcusable, while to others logical if not particularly courageous given the military pressures they felt back home upon their homelands by advancing German forces.[214] At Pearl, this gambit ultimately failed, precipitating the famously impassioned response by President Roosevelt, lubricating the U.S. entry into global war with a passion that had failed to muster prior to this direct assault. Tokyo may have viewed U.S. Hawaiian possessions as distant colonial territories on par with Guam and the Philippines, of importance to U.S. forces but not sacred to the American people – but once America's war ships became under water tombs for thousands of young American seamen while fast asleep, the United States could not. But in

[214] Matthew J. Flynn. *First Strike: Preemptive War in Modern History*. New York: Routledge, 2008.

Alaska, Tokyo's gambit largely succeeded – at least for a time. Japan would ultimately hold the outer Aleutians for a year, and two of its islands, Kiska on June 6 and Attu on June 7, would remain Japanese forward operation bases (FOBs) until Attu was finally liberated after a tough slog across treacherous, fog-shrouded muskeg, by a joint U.S.-Canadian force totaling 34,426 men on May 30, 1943 – with over 500 allied troops dead, more than a thousand injured, and nearly the entire Japanese garrison exceeding 2,000 dead – and operations to liberate Kiska would commence on August 15th, with the island declared secure on August 24th.[215] Ironically, its entire Japanese garrison of over 5,000 men had been evacuated under the cover of fog on July 28th (itself a lesson on how Arctic weather and climate remain the final arbiter of power project in the North), and the U.S. counter-invasion, despite the absence of opposing forces would nonetheless result in over 300 killed due to friendly fire, accidents, and the loss of the destroyer USS Abner Read from a mine strike – making Wintermute's "war in the fog" descriptor especially pertinent.

[215] John H. Cloe J. *Attu: The Forgotten Battle*. Anchorage: National Park Service, 2017, p.21.

The bombing of Dutch Harbor did only inflict modest damage, particularly when compared to the steep losses suffered at Pearl, and, by the time of the invasion of the outer Aleutians, the Pacific was already fully-embroiled by war of such scale and intensity that the limited destructiveness of the assault on Alaska may have contributed to its relatively dispassionate reception, and which was overshadowed by the far more kinetic and costly Guadalcanal campaign in the Solomons. U.S. and Canadian war planners responded to Japan's audacity, and its abilities to hold territories once under the American flag – planning accordingly for their inevitable counteroffensive, and accelerating efforts already under way to fortify Alaska through a rapid program of military modernization and development that included the cutting of the Alaska-Canada Highway (Alcan) across the far northwest roughly following the Northwest Staging Route; and erecting the Canol Pipeline across the rugged Yukon to the oil fields of Norman Wells, NWT – which would more tightly integrate Alaska through modern infrastructure and transportation systems to the lower 48. At an operational level, one can conclude with certainty that the war in the Aleutians was in no way overlooked, nor forgotten,

by Alaska's defenders but only by later generations taught to solemnly remember Pearl Harbor but for whom the Aleutians War remained untaught, and thus beyond the memories of later generations. With Arctic security now on the minds of political, diplomatic and military leaders around the northern hemisphere, the lessons of the Aleutians are now essential, if only to help prepare the current generation for the possibilities of another War in the Fog, should such a conflict once again become unavoidable.

The Aleutians have been long-recognized for their strategic potential. Geographers refer to the Aleutians as the "North Pacific stepping stones" (NPSS) or the "stepping stones of giants," a concept that appealed to theorists of air and sea power who recognized the strategic importance of the region to the security of North America and Northeast Asia well before Japan's assault.[216] But even if Tokyo believed the Aleutians were "stepping stones" to Japan, most historians of the Aleutians war, including John Haile Cloe and Galen Roger Perras,

[216] Kathleen A. Cooper. *'North to Alaska': The Geostrategic Importance of the Last Frontier*. Maxwell Air Force Base, Alabama: School of Advanced Air and Space Studies, Air University, June, 2012.

believe that in reality, they proved to be little more than "stepping stones to nowhere," as Perras has described them.[217] Instead of precipitating an impassioned response like the earlier attack on Pearl, the United States demonstrated its resolve through restraint, waiting and preparing for what would be one its first efforts to reclaim Japanese-held islands across the vast Pacific.

To retake these islands in such forbidding terrain required much planning, and time, weather and geography initially favored the defenders, with Aleutian geopolitics enhancing the old Clausewitzian precept that defense is superior to offense by three-to-one. Indeed, in the Aleutians and beyond throughout the Arctic, the defense may be even more disproportionately superior – perhaps by as much as ten to one, if not more. For an entire year, the red-dotted Hinomaru flag of imperial Japan flew over Alaskan territory, albeit remote insular territory well over a thousand nautical miles from the North American mainland. For the Unangan of the outer Aleutians, this war resulted in

[217] Galen R. Perras. *Stepping Stones to Nowhere*. Vancouver/Annapolis: UBC Press/Naval Institute Press; and John Haile Cloe. *Attu: The Forgotten Battle*. Anchorage: National Park Service, 2017.

their displacement from their home communities to Hokkaido by the Japanese, and to evacuation camps in Southeast Alaska by American forces – resulting in protracted suffering and the creation of "lost villages" that remain uninhabited today,[218] and which continue to haunt us as we again imagine a future where war in the Arctic is no longer the impossibility that had until recently been widely presumed.

Hokkaido in the Modern World: An Outpost of Freedom Adjacent to the Vast Russian Arctic

According to Alec Rice, "Japan is an ideal archipelagic staging area in the western Pacific" and its "geographic location as the backbone of the first and second island chains indeed makes it a critical strategic location."[219] In contrast to Okinawa, with its "small, concentrated land area already hosting over twenty-five thousand active duty troops (primarily Marines and airmen) and approximately

[218] Rachel Mason, "You Can't Go Home Again: Process of Displacement and Emplacement in the 'Lost Villages' of the Aleutian Islands." *Alaska Journal of Anthropology*, Vol. 8, No. 2 (2010), pp.17-29.
[219] Alec Rice, "North to Hokkaido: The Case for a Permanent US Army Presence on Japan's Northern Frontier," *Modern War Institute Blog*, May 31, 2023.

70 percent of all US military bases in Japan," Hokkaido offers "advantages for the US-Japan military alliance are as bountiful as they are unrecognized. For instance, Hokkaido has ample open space, low population density, and dispersed JGSDF bases that could be jointly used by the US military."[220] As Rice recounts, "In ancient Japan, Hokkaido (then known as Ezo) was at the distant northern outskirts of the realm. By the early nineteenth century, the increasing encroachment of the West and Russia sounded an alarm within then-shuttered Japan of the necessity to secure its northern border. With the fall of the *shogunate* in the 1860s and the advent of the Meiji Restoration, organized settlement of Hokkaido and beyond began in earnest in conjunction with Japan's rapid industrial modernization."[221] As Rice further describes, "A core endeavor of the settlement of Hokkaido was the *tondenhei*, or 'colonial troops,' system … a homesteading/military program in which former families of the now-disbanded samurai class were provisioned, housed, and received land in exchange for emigration to

[220] Alec Rice, "North to Hokkaido: The Case for a Permanent US Army Presence on Japan's Northern Frontier," *Modern War Institute Blog*, May 31, 2023.
[221] Ibid.

Hokkaido from other areas of Japan. For the government, the benefits were multifold, as these *tondenhei* not only helped settle Japan's undeveloped northern frontier, but also served as a military bulwark against Russian encroachment from the north."[222]

Hokkaido continued to serve as an important bulwark against southward encroachment by Soviet Russia (and later, post-Soviet Russia) after World War II, through the Cold War, and into the post-Cold War era. Moreover, while it is distant from Taiwan (and thus widely perceived to be peripheral to recent efforts to contain China's rise), it proffers prime strategic geography for today's emergent Arctic Cold War with its current strategic alignment between Beijing and Moscow: "With a land area of eighty-three thousand square kilometers, it is the twenty-first largest island in the world and roughly the size of the entirety of Ireland. Hokkaido's population of 5.26 million residents approximates that of the state of South Carolina. However, it is not only its size but more importantly its geographic location that is strategically

[222] Alec Rice, "North to Hokkaido: The Case for a Permanent US Army Presence on Japan's Northern Frontier," *Modern War Institute Blog*, May 31, 2023.

consequential when considering the current global atmosphere of renewed great power competition."[223] Rice describes Hokkaido's geostrategic salience, noting it's "bordered by the Sea of Japan to the west, the Sea of Okhotsk to the northeast, and the Pacific Ocean to the southeast. Toward its south it is separated from the Japanese island of Honshu by the Tsugaru Strait, while the Russian island of Sakhalin is only forty-three kilometers away across the Soya Strait to the north. Both the Soya and Tsugaru Straits are vital for Russian and Chinese military and commercial shipping access through the Sea of Japan to the Pacific."[224] Moreover, "Since forcibly taking the Japanese territories of southern Sakhalin (known in Japanese as Minami Karafuto) and the Kuril Islands at the close of World War II, the Soviet Union – and, since its collapse, Russia – has maintained military forces there as a protective gateway for Pacific access from its Far East port of Vladivostok on the Sea of Japan, home of the Russian Pacific Fleet. Russian presence in the

[223] Alec Rice, "North to Hokkaido: The Case for a Permanent US Army Presence on Japan's Northern Frontier," *Modern War Institute Blog*, May 31, 2023.
[224] Ibid.

Hokkaido vicinity also serves to deny US military access to the Sea of Okhotsk."[225]

This unsteady geopolitical standoff lingering unresolved since the final days of World War II – combined with a tightening strategic partnership between China and Russia that has yielded an increasingly joint effort to project power into waters long perceived by Tokyo to be essential to Japanese security[226] – has much to do with the geopolitical foundations to, and future prioritization of, Japan's Arctic interests, even if Tokyo's formally enunciated Arctic policy in 2015 asserted a more cooperative framework echoed in the comparably cooperative Arctic policies of neighboring China in 2018 (itself an echo of South Korea's cooperative 2013 Arctic policy) that were enunciated in this same era of Arctic cooperation.

Rice describes the evolving strategic partnership between China and Russia, and how it favors China's gathering Arctic interests and ambitions:

[225] Alec Rice, "North to Hokkaido: The Case for a Permanent US Army Presence on Japan's Northern Frontier," *Modern War Institute Blog*, May 31, 2023.
[226] Erdem Lamazhapov and Andreas Østhagen, "Alaska, Not Greenland, Should Worry the United States in the Arctic," *The Arctic Institute*, October 28, 2025.

"In its increasing cooperation with its Russian 'no limits' partner China has characteristically maneuvered into an advantageous strategic position. It is well known that China is eagerly eyeing the Arctic both for the plentiful resources there as well as shipping access through the Northern Sea Route. Deepening cooperation with Russia is a means to this Arctic access. Both commercially and militarily traversing the seas around northern Japan is part and parcel of this future Sino-Russian Arctic expansion."[227] Moreover, Rice adds: "As the Ukraine War continues, it appears Russia will be increasingly dependent, both economically and militarily, upon China. While expending minimal resources and ensuring ample access to Russian fuel products, China is positioned to leverage this dependence and influence and control a weakened and addicted Russia, offering support in exchange for Arctic tradeoffs. In fact, this Chinese expansion is well underway. For example, Russia has recently agreed to grant China commercial shipping access to Vladivostok. This is the first time Russia has granted China such access since obtaining this territory from the Qing Dynasty under one of what

[227] Alec Rice, "North to Hokkaido: The Case for a Permanent US Army Presence on Japan's Northern Frontier," *Modern War Institute Blog*, May 31, 2023.

China refers to as the 'unequal treaties' 163 years ago."[228]

As Rice colorfully describes, this places new pressures upon Japan to shift its attention from its south – where the perennial threat to Taiwan, and China's persistent probes of Japan's borders and tests of Tokyo's military and diplomatic response to them[229] – to its north, where Beijing, in conjunction with Moscow, are now testing Tokyo: "Russia's invasion of Ukraine and its increasing chumminess with China have called into question [Japan's] post-Cold War southern focus, however. Japan has in effect been lowering its hands to guard against a gut punch in the south. This shift, combined with a nearly total absence of US military presence in Hokkaido, is increasingly exposing a vulnerable

[228] Alec Rice, "North to Hokkaido: The Case for a Permanent US Army Presence on Japan's Northern Frontier," *Modern War Institute Blog*, May 31, 2023.
[229] See: Julian Ryall, "As regional tensions rise, China probing neighbors' defense," *Deutsche Welle (DW.com)*, October 13, 2022; Brad Lendon and Junko Ogura, "Japan claims Chinese military plane violated its territorial airspace for the first time," *CNN*, August 27, 2024; Kyodo News, "Chinese aircraft carrier enters southern Japan contiguous zone," *Kyodo News*, September 18, 2024; Julian Ryall, "China's moves in disputed waters spark concerns in Japan about 'incremental control'," *South China Morning Post*, May 16, 2025.

northern Pacific glass jaw."[230] Rice concludes that, "Viewed through the lens of history Japan faces military threats not only from the south, but also from its north in what is essentially a massive pincer. … Since its incorporation into Japan, Hokkaido has been intimately connected with the defense of the nation. Its history and geography at the frontier of Japan are the foundation of its local culture, and its residents have always been necessarily keenly sensitive to threats from abroad."[231]

If a new Cold War ultimately re-bifurcates the Arctic region – and many believe there already is a new Arctic Cold War under way, more so since the war in Ukraine began – the home front in the remote northern borderlands of nearly all the Arctic states (Iceland, as the Arctic's smaller insular state, lacks its own terrestrial borderland, but its waters are adjacent and proximate to Greenland, which has experienced its own strategic tensions in recent months, albeit from its alliance partner and not from either Russia or China) where continued gains in

[230] Alec Rice, "North to Hokkaido: The Case for a Permanent US Army Presence on Japan's Northern Frontier," *Modern War Institute Blog*, May 31, 2023.
[231] Ibid.

native development will be crucial for the political legitimacy, territorial integrity, and political sovereignty they assert, will be an important arena of engagement, indeed perhaps the most salient human terrain. This is as true for Hokkaido, which is Japan's most near-Arctic island and the locus of its sovereignty dispute with Russia since Japan's northward expansion began in centuries past. This is one where the West as a whole possesses many advantages that present an opportunity to consolidate victory and ensure unrivaled regional supremacy through more inclusive and effective governance – in partnership with the indigenous peoples of the north, from the Ainu homeland straddling the Japan-Russia frontier just north of Hokkaido to the vast Inuit homeland stretching from northeastern Siberia to Greenland (where another sovereignty struggle looms between the United States and Denmark over Greenland's sovereign affinities, amidst Denmark's own evolving efforts to accommodate Greenland's increasing aspirations for independence within its current constitutional union.

External actors may engage in, and potentially disrupt, such efforts – but it remains unknown how successful such efforts will be if the West stays its

course on indigenous engagement and empowerment. In this looming geopolitical showdown, geography, history, economics and culture align to position Japan in the right place, at the right time – and with the right ingredients of *Arcticness* – to play an increasingly important prominent diplomatic and military role as GPC continues to heat up amidst the Arctic's historic thaw. As the cooperative pillars of the Arctic – envisioned not just by Japan but its Northeast Asian neighbors and the entire ecosystem of states with a role at the Arctic Council (whether founding members or more recent observers) – are reconsidered, and GPC comes to dominate the mindset of Arctic policy planners around the circumpolar world, so too are the geopolitical foundations of the Arctic region and its interconnections to adjacent near-Arctic territories.

As Tokyo prepares for the Arctic's evolving future, Japan's role in this shifting kaleidoscope of contending strategic, diplomatic, economic, scientific, and cultural interests in the Arctic will be ever more essential to the future stability of the Pacific-Arctic region, both as a counterweight to China and Russia and partner to the West – with

Hokkaido serving as a bridge between both north and south, and past and future.

Northern Foundations of Japan's Arctic Policy: Hokkaido as a Cultural and Geopolitical Crossroads

Since Japan's northward expansion absorbed Hokkaido in the late 19th century, its sovereign possession has imbued Japan with what we can describe as an inherent *Arcticness*, from its important cultural role as the homeland of the indigenous Ainu people to its historic role as an essential frontier buffer to contain Russian expansion, to its emergent role as an exemplar of Japan's recent efforts to confront its complex history of expansion onto indigenously self-governing lands and its willingness to increasingly recognize Ainu indigenous rights – catalyzed, just we see across the Arctic, by land losses and large scale megaprojects such as the contentious Nibutani dam project that expropriated and then flooded Ainu lands along the Saru River that led directly to successful Ainu litigation in which Japan's courts recognized Ainu cultural rights, an important milestone on the road toward historic reconciliation with and indigenous rights

affirmation for the Ainu.[232] As Georgina Stevens recounts, "On March 27, 1997, as part of the Nibutani Dam case (Kayano v. Hokkaido Expropriation Committee), the Sapporo District court became the first state organ to officially recognize the Ainu people as indigenous," and "recognized that the Ainu's right to the enjoyment of their own culture is protected under both Article 27 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and Article 13 of the Japanese Constitution."[233]

While it has been slow and incremental process facing persistent bureaucratic resistance from Japan's national government, the years since have witnessed further progress on the restoration of Ainu rights, starting in 1997 with the Act for the Promotion of Ainu Culture, followed in 2008 by the non-binding but no less historically important resolution recognizing the Ainu as an indigenous

[232] Georgina Stevens, "More Than Paper: Protecting Ainu Culture and Influencing Japanese Dam Development," *Cultural Survival Quarterly*, May 7, 2010.
[233] Ibid; for background on Ainu culture, see Shigeru Kayano, *Our Land was a Forest: An Ainu Memoir.* Boulder: Westview Press, 1994, whose author was the Nibutani Dam case's plaintiff, Shigeru Kayano, the first Ainu member of Japan's Diet whose family continues to serve a prominent role in the Ainu rights and cultural preservation movement.

people of Japan, which paved the way to the more formal and binding 2019 Ainu Culture Promotion Law.[234] Indeed, large-scale megaprojects such as that eternalized by the Nibutani Dam case and its favorable outcome for the Ainu remain an important part of the continuing narrative of Arctic development, and over time have transformed from State-driven projects imposed on native peoples that had little or no say on those projects to co-managed joint venture projects with the equity and managerial participation of natives. Indeed, many of the more audacious of these projects were conceived just as Alaska was transforming from a remote territory purchased in 1867 into a bona fide U.S. state in 1959. It was the resulting era of Arctic land claims that fostered an emergence of a new, modern corporate culture across the indigenous Arctic, and though this corporate culture is not representative of the entirety of the native community and at times finds itself at odds with traditionalists and practitioners of subsistence, it has

[234] For an historic discussion of the history and politics of the Ainu rights movement, see Jeffry Gayman, "State Policy, Indigenous Activism, and the Conundrums of Ethnicity for the Ainu of Japan," Chapter 20 of *Routledge Handbook of Race and Ethnicity in Asia*, Michael Weiner ed. London: Routledge, 2021, 286-302.

provided a growing pool of trained and experienced participants to channel such megaprojects and reshape them to better meet the needs of native communities and values, with native hiring and subcontracting preferences, distributions of royalties and dividends, commitments to clean-up and restore lands to their original state (or provide compensation when that proves impossible). Elsewhere in the world, megaprojects on native lands (primarily proposed or constructed dams and pipelines) have led to persistent clashes between native communities and state interests (Borneo, Burma), but also formal reconciliation processes through land claims treaties (Quebec and the Western Arctic), and/or recognition of indigenous cultural rights (Hokkaido, where the unprecedented Nibutani Dam case led to judicial recognition of indigenous cultural rights in Japan, part of a slow but forward process of recognition that continues to the present).[235]

The Alaska experience – harnessing the transformative vision (and risks) of megaproject development and channeling these, through political organization, lobbying and negotiation, into a

[235] Barry Scott Zellen, *Arctic Exceptionalism: Cooperation in a Contested World*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2024.

catalyst for positive change and indigenous empowerment – would directly inspire the rest of Arctic North America, with land claims treaties following quickly on the heels of the 1971 ANCSA legislation, including the 1975 James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement (JBNQA); the 1978 Inuvialuit-Canada Agreement-in-Principle (AiP) (which lay the foundation for the Inuvialuit Final Agreement (IFA) of 1984 that so profoundly redefined the land claim model from what ANCSA's architects originally imagined would be a vehicle of rapid modernization of native Alaska's economy over 20 years through a corporate development model, not entirely unlike the slower-paced HBC model earlier in history which acculturated native subsistence economies to the global fur trade; the 1980 Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA) that protected much of Alaska's wilderness and redressed ANCSA's exclusion of subsistence; the 1993 Nunavut land claim agreement and subsequent 1999 formation of the Nunavut territory (after a successful 1992 plebiscite to divide the Northwest Territories in two);[236] and the 2005 Labrador

[236] CBC News, "Nunavut: New Territory Born at Midnight," *CBC Focus North*, April 1, 1999.

(Nunatsiavut) Inuit land claim – with the potential for one more Inuit land claim by the Inuit-Metis of southern Labrador, the NunatuKavut people or NunatuKavummiut, who are now engaged in discussions with Ottawa while facing intense resistance from the other Inuit regions–with settled claims in territories with less non-native settlement, and where Metis identity has been subsumed to Inuit identity and not separate from it, in contrast to the more intensively settled southern Labrador.

Inuit continue to work to complete their restoration of lands and rights, and their impressive gains over the past half century are testament to their determination and persistence. To continue their advance in indigenous restoration, they've long recognized the necessity of organizing on the international stage, and acting diplomatically as other sovereigns do, entering into treaties, and helping to foster the evolution of international law and diplomacy in the continued direction of indigenous rights recognition. That is why the Inuit Circumpolar Conference (now Council) began as an international forum in the 1970s, reuniting the Inuit regions that had been absorbed into separate Arctic states through colonial history and state expansion into the Inuit homeland (mirroring the Nordic

expansion into the Sami homeland and the Japanese and later Russian expansion into the Ainu homeland), and in time, with the contribution and leadership of the ICC (and partnership with their respective Arctic states), the Arctic Council would emerge as a/transnational intergovernmental forum bringing together tribe and state to collaborative forge new Arctic policies through its various working groups, where transnational, national, subnational and non-state entities and polities can work together as partners united by the mutuality of their commitment to the preservation of indigenous culture, the northern environment, and the stability of the circumpolar Arctic and adjacent territories.[237]

Hokkaido's role as geopolitical bridge linking ports in China, Korea and Japan to European markets via the Northern Sea Route along Russia's North Pacific and Arctic coast, is thus of particular, and increasing salience, and is thus a product not just of geographical proximity but also cultural connectedness via the transnational indigenous rights movement. This positions Japan not only in the middle of a Westphalian sovereignty dispute with a neighboring Arctic power, Russia, but in an

[237] Barry Scott Zellen, *Arctic Exceptionalism: Cooperation in a Contested World*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2024.

overlapping multilevel jurisdictional dispute that is evolving toward reconciliation with a northern indigenous people, the Ainu, with their own tragic history of occupancy of lands that are now both considered to be 'Japanese' and 'Russian' national territories, providing two frames of reference for contextualizing the Arctic today: a Westphalian geopolitical context and a transnational, multilevel and multilateral Arctic It is this confluence that so distinctively shapes Japan's perspective on the Arctic and contextualizes its Arctic policy. Curiously, Hokkaido, briefly the temporary home for indigenous Aleuts forcibly removed from their homeland by the Japanese upon their retreat from the Aleutians, has been the locus for Japan's indigenous Ainu to re-assert their indigenous claims, and to negotiate, with much success, for a restoration of their indigenous rights, making gains in cultural restoration but without advances on the question of land rights, in notable contrast to Alaska and Canada where restoring indigenous land rights has made great strides but with some parallel to the Nordic states and Russia where the state has been less multilevel and more unitary and thus able to present a less yielding firewall to slow gains in settling historic indigenous land claims. That

notwithstanding, Hokkaido has gained widespread recognition since the Nibutani Dam case brought judicial recognition of Ainu cultural rights to Japan, part of a slow but forward process of increasing recognition that continues to the present, and which helps to solidify the bonds the align Japan with the member states of the Arctic Council. [238]

Whaling and Dealing: Implications of Japanese Whaling in Polar Diplomacy

In addition to its shared commitment (which has gradually taken root after initial reluctance, a commonality it shares with America, Canada, the Nordic States, and Russia) to redressing historical injustices against its own indigenous peoples through its proactive policies of indigenous rights recognition and re-affirmation, Japan also shares with the Arctic a long and proud history as a whaling nation – joining fellow commercial whaling nations, Iceland and Norway, both member states on the Arctic Council, and subsistence whaling nations including Canada, the United States, Greenland, Denmark, and Russia; Japan recently brought to an end its controversial

[238] Barry Scott Zellen, *Arctic Exceptionalism: Cooperation in a Contested World*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2024.

scientific program in Antarctic waters, and shifting its whaling practices to coastal whaling within its EEZ, so that its cultural commitment to continued whaling now has much more in common with the Arctic states, and faces less political pushback than its more controversial Antarctic whaling program, which had been targeted by the international animal rights movements popular in many western nations.[239]

Indeed, in recent years, Japan has refocused its whaling efforts on coastal commercial whaling within its own Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), having brought to an end its long-running global scientific whaling program from the Southern Ocean to the High North Pacific. Japan's transition from global scientific whaling on the high seas to regional coastal whaling in its own territorial seas mirrors the evolution of whaling elsewhere, notably the transition from no large-cetacean subsistence whaling by Canadian Inuit to what has now become

[239] Barry Scott Zellen, "Lessons from the 1982 Canadian IWC Withdrawal and Restoration of Inuit Bowhead Hunting for Japan's 2019 IWC Withdrawal and Restoration of Coastal Whaling." Chapter 8 in Part II: Cultural Considerations, Nikolas Sellheim and Joji Morishita, eds., *Japan's Withdrawal from International Whaling Regulation: Implications for Global Environmental Diplomacy*. London: Routledge, 2023.

a fully revitalized, persistent and continuous annual subsistence whaling tradition in Arctic Canada, and also with parallels to contemporary commercial coastal whaling in Iceland and Norway, often conducted side-by-side with and from the same ports as whale-watching cruises – paradoxically serving the very same clientele, who seek to both witness the majesty of whales in nature only to then taste whale meat once back onshore – though perceived as paradoxical, this also suggests whale harvesting and whale protection have more in common than today's fractious and polarized political discourse might otherwise suggest.[240] And as WDC has reported, in Norway "[t]ourists are a prime target for those marketing whale meat, which is sold in supermarkets, dockside fish markets, restaurants and promoted aboard cruise ships. Skincare products and supplements containing whale are also available."[241]

Since quitting the IWC, Japan's centuries-long, and indelibly proud cultural whaling tradition has been

[240] On this seeming paradox of Icelandic ecotourism, and efforts to counter it, see: Abby Young-Powell, "'Meet Us, Don't Eat Us': Iceland Turns from Whale Eaters to Whale Watchers," *The Guardian*, March 28, 2022.
[241] Whale and Dolphin Conservation (WDC), "Whaling in Norway," *Whales.org*, undated.

navigating its way from the rough-and-tumble Hobbesian international arena, where it faced off against piratical NGOs such as the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society and Greenpeace in a series of recurring Antarctic high-sea skirmishes and rammings, to the more Rousseauian domestic context where whaling is effectively shielded from external interference by the Law of the Sea so long when practiced inside one's EEZ. Insulated from the perils of international anarchy, Japanese whalers can now refocus on overcoming both declining mainstream Japanese interest in consuming whale meat (which has continued even with the IWC exit and shift to coastal whaling) amidst persistent criticism from international environmental activists as Japanese coastal whalers work to preserve Japan's centuries-long cultural tradition of whaling on a more local scale. Two dueling documentary films capture this dialectic between local Japanese whalers and the international anti-whaling activist community: Louie Psihoyos' sensationalist 2009 *The Cove*, which won Best Documentary at the 2010 Academy Awards, and Japanese director

Keiko Yagi's passionate 2015 rebuttal, *Behind "The Cove": The Quiet Japanese Speak Out*.[242]

The secular decline in whale consumption by the Japanese populace may prove the biggest challenge to this effort at cultural revitalization, as whale meat, long a staple and in the immediate aftermath of World War II a vital path toward a return of Japan's nutritional self-sufficiency (one strongly supported by the U.S. military government administering the post-conflict nation), continues to fall out of favor, but creative efforts are under way to spark renewed popular support for Japan's whaling pastime. A recent (2024) documentary, *Whale Restaurant: Inconvenient Food*, by Japanese filmmaker Keiko Yagi, director of the 2015 rebuttal to *The Cove, Behind "The Cove": The Quiet Japanese Speak Out*, illustrates the endurance of Japan's whale dining culture.[243] As Japan refocuses on coastal whaling in wake of its own more recent 2019 IWC withdrawal, the Japanese whaling industry and its supporters across Japan seeks to

[242] See Louie Psihoyos, *The Cove*. Skywalker Ranch, Nicasio, California: Oceanic Preservation Society (OPS), 2009; and Keiko Yagi, *Behind "The Cove": The Quiet Japanese Speak Out*. Tokyo: Yagi Film Inc., 2015.
[243] Keiko Yagi, *Whale Restaurant: Inconvenient Food*. Tokyo: Yagi Film Inc., 2024.

spark renewed interest in the consumption of whale meat in Japan, through all manner of innovations from the 2022 deployment of whale-meat food trucks (called "Kitchen Cars" in Japan)[244] to the installation of whale meat vending machines in January 2023[245] to pro-active courtship of international social media influencers through whale-tasting events designed to foster the emergence of a tourist market interested in experiencing whale cuisine,[246] similar to that which had arisen side-by-side with the whale-watching industry in Iceland, in Tokyo's hope to reverse by fostering tourist interest the long decline in whale meat consumption by the Japanese populace as the nation struggles to revitalize an ancient tradition that unites Japan with its Arctic neighbors.

[244] Jay Alabaster, "'Kitchen Car' Whale Cuisine: New Dishes for a New Generation," *Japan Forward*, August 29, 2022.
[245] Associated Press, "Japanese Company Launches Whale Meat Vending Machines: Major supermarkets have largely stayed away from whale meat to avoid protests by anti-whaling groups," *Food Manufacturing*, January 30, 2023.
[246] Justin McCurry, "Whale Meat on the Menu as Japanese Suppliers Try to Tempt Tourists: With the domestic market in long-term decline, whalers and restaurants are working with the Japan travel bureau in a bid to win over skeptical tourists," *The Guardian*, March 23, 2023.

Coastal whaling in Japan in essence *right-sizes* whaling from global to national and local scales, bringing it within a domestic constitutional and economic framework and embedding it in a tightly-controlled management regime to ensure quotas remain sustainable, a pre-requisite for extending a whole of government approach to revitalizing whaling culture to a broad-based popular coalition that includes urban (and often environmentalist) communities in addition to local whaling communities.[247] Indeed, this aligns well with the observations of Dennis Normile, in the pages of *Science*: "Japan's 26 December 2018 announcement that it will withdraw from the International Whaling Commission (IWC) and resume commercial whaling in its own waters triggered fierce criticism around the world. U.K. environment secretary Michael Gove was 'extremely disappointed.' Greenpeace called the decision 'out of step with the international community' and its timing in the middle of the holiday season 'sneaky.' But some conservationists say the hand wringers are missing the point. What matters most is that Japan has decided 'to stop

[247] Japan Forward, "INTERVIEW: Sustainable Resource Management is Still the Key Goal for Japanese Whaling – Tsutomu Tamura," *Japan Forward*, October 30, 2021.

large-scale whaling' on the high seas under the mantle of scientific research, says Justin Cooke, a marine population assessment specialist at the Center for Ecosystem Management Studies in Emmendingen, Germany. Given the declining appetite for whale meat, Japan is unlikely to start to catch many more whales in its own waters than it already does, he adds: 'There won't be much change on the ground.' Patrick Ramage, a whaling specialist at the International Fund for Animal Welfare in Yarmouth, Massachusetts, agrees. 'It's good news for whales,' he says – and also for IWC, which can finally end its 'food fights over whaling' and focus on other issues in whale conservation."[248]

Though hampered by both domestic and international head winds, and with historic tensions arising from the decimation of whale stocks by commercial whalers, adversely impacting indigenous subsistence whalers, whaling as a national and indigenous tradition has served as a cultural, economic and diplomatic bridge uniting

[248] Dennis Normile, "Why Japan's Exit from International Whaling Treaty May Actually Benefit Whales: Commercial whaling will replace a controversial research program, but the market for whale meat is declining," *Science*, January 10, 2019.

Japan with Iceland and Norway, with a bilateral whale trade providing a starting point for Japan to more broadly engage with the Arctic states with active indigenous whaling practices including the United States, Canada, Greenland/Denmark and Russia and further reinforces what many Arctic field researchers sense when in Japan (that Japan's proud and enduring whaling heritage is part and parcel of its inherent *Arcticness*.) While Iceland's domestic whaling program has been under pressure from economic, international activist, diplomatic and domestic political pressures, it has, with occasional setbacks, persevered until recently, and developed an economic lifeline through its whale trade with Japan, despite Japan's own battles with the same constellation of forces that seem likewise aligned in their opposition to whaling. Indeed, as Arctic environmental scholar Nikolas Sellheim has reported on *Polar Connection*, "At the end of August 2023, several media sources reported that whaling has resumed in Iceland after a hiatus of two years between 2019–2022 and a suspension of licences in 2023 over animal welfare concerns; commercial whaling for fin whales has now

resumed."[249] As Sellheim points out, "Whaling still constitutes an activity that can be found in several places all over the world. Even though Iceland, Japan and Norway conduct commercial whaling, this cannot be compared to the uncontrolled commercial whaling of the past that decimated the numbers of the great whales dramatically. Instead, in all commercially whaling countries, the activity is strictly regulated – at least from an ecological perspective."[250]

Of note, Iceland exported to Japan its largest shipment of fin whale meat ever in its 2023 whaling season, with a total value "worth almost £18m."[251] As WDC's Danny Groves observed: "The largest shipment of fin whale meat from Iceland to Japan for 30 years has arrived in port in what could be a last desperate attempt to breathe new life into a dying and cruel industry … Fin whales are hunted in Iceland almost exclusively for meat export to Japan. However, the sale of the imported whale

[249] Nikolas Sellheim, "Whaling activities have resumed in Iceland and Japan, and the world speaks out. Does it?" *Polar Connection*, December 2, 2023.
[250] Ibid.
[251] Danny Groves D (2023) "Exported Meat from Vulnerable Whales Worth Almost £18m Reaches Japan." *Whale and Dolphin Conservation (WDC)*, February 10, 2023.

meat is not guaranteed in Japan. For years, interest in the meat has been declining there, and a survey by the Japanese Ministry of Fisheries shows that consumption in 2021 was so low that it does not even appear in the statistics. In the past, unsold fin whale meat has even been made into dog food."[252] As Groves further reported, "'Fin whales are listed by the IUCN as vulnerable yet Iceland and Japan are undermining international conservation efforts with this whale meat trade. In the face of species extinction and the climate crisis, this export is a scandal,' says Katrin Matthes, who coordinates the work on Japanese whaling at WDC."[253] Like Iceland, Norway has a long history of exporting whale meat to Japan. As WDC reports, "Prior to the ban on commercial whaling, Norway exported over 50% of the meat and blubber from hunted whales to Japan. After the moratorium, Norway originally agreed to halt its trade in whale products, but instead resumed exports in 2001."[254]

[252] Danny Groves D (2023) "Exported Meat from Vulnerable Whales Worth Almost £18m Reaches Japan." *Whale and Dolphin Conservation (WDC)*, February 10, 2023.
[253] Ibid.
[254] Whale and Dolphin Conservation (WDC), "Whaling in Norway," *Whales.org*, undated.

A Dynamic Decade of Arctic Change Since Japan's 2015 Arctic Policy

It's been over a decade since Japan joined the Arctic Council as an observer, along with fellow Asian states with increasing Arctic interests China, South Korea, Singapore and India in 2013, and in that same year, mentioned the Arctic for the first time in Tokyo's second Basic Plan on Ocean Policy (BPOP), which since the first BPOP in 2008 has been updated every five years. Two years later, Japan articulated its own Arctic policy, which like those of its allies and neighbors at the Arctic Council echoed widely held sentiments favoring circumpolar cooperation, and highlighting the mutual opportunities of scientific cooperation and sustainable utilization of the Arctic and its resources as well as the joint challenges of climate change and the stresses it brings to the fragile Arctic environment and ecosystems. These have been augmented and refined in subsequent BPOPs.

Khan Pham has examined the evolution of Japan's Arctic policy across this dynamic decade, noting Tokyo had adopted its current Arctic policy in October 2015, which articulated Japan's commitment to and embrace of Arctic cooperation

and multilateralism that had predominated in Arctic diplomacy from the Cold War's end through to the collapse of universal circumpolar cooperation after Russia invaded Ukraine in 2022.[255] As Pham observed, Japan's 2015 policy "covered a wide range of topics" including "global environmental issues, indigenous peoples of the Arctic, science and technology, the rule of law, the promotion of international cooperation, the Arctic Sea Route, natural resources development, and national security." Pham adds that "for a more comprehensive understanding of Japan's engagement with the Arctic, one should look at Japan's Basic Plan on Ocean Policy" which "provides a clearer picture of the evolving thought process behind Japanese policymaking related to the Arctic," and "is reviewed and updated every five years to ensure its relevance and effectiveness in addressing the evolving maritime issues."[256]

Pham recalls that the "Arctic first appeared in the Second Basic Plan on Ocean Policy in 2013," which was released on April 28th, just before, Japan – along with fellow Asian states China, South Korea,

[255] Khan Pham, "Japan Steps Up Its Arctic Engagement," *The Arctic Institute*, April 16, 2024.
[256] Ibid.

Singapore and India – joined the Arctic Council as observers in May. The Second BPOP "outlined three directions for the Arctic: observing and studying the region from a global perspective, increasing international cooperation, and utilizing the Arctic Sea Route."[257] Pham notes Japan's "fundamental priorities around research, international cooperation, and sustainable utilization remain consistent across the Second and Third Basic Plan on Ocean Policy," which followed in April 2018.[258]

Kentaro Furuya, professor of international law of the sea at the Japan Coast Guard Academy (JCGA) and adjunct professor at Japan's National Graduate Institute for Policy Studies (GRIPS), has noted that Japan is "located close to the Arctic Sea and is a junction for ships to and from" the Arctic.[259] This positions Japan as a natural maritime gateway to the Arctic, particularly the Northern Sea Route (NSR) whose eastern terminus is close by, with the island of Hokkaido the nearest allied territory to the NSR.

[257] Khan Pham, "Japan Steps Up Its Arctic Engagement," *The Arctic Institute*, April 16, 2024.
[258] Ibid.
[259] Barry Scott Zellen, "Japan's Emerging Arctic Interests: An Interview with CDR Kentaro Furuya, JCG," United States Coast Guard Academy website, August 19, 2009.

JCG's mission has focused on Japan's territorial seas as well as surrounding waters inclusive of its EEZ and SAR responsibility area, and protecting the homeland from sea-borne threats such as those presented by illicit smugglers, North Korean saboteurs, and China's provocations and border probes, only recently turning its attention to the Arctic as new challenges emanating from Arctic waters emerge.[260] Russia's resurgence and China's continuing naval expansion (and increasingly articulated Arctic interests) have galvanized attention in Japan as it has across the Pacific in the United States in response to the return of Westphalian state competition in the Arctic basin. This rapid demise of a cooperative, multilateral Arctic defined by a utopic, transnational Arctic exceptionalism and the return of a more Hobbesian Arctic defined increasingly by great power competition has caught the attention of leaders on both sides of the Pacific.

It's not just Russia's resurgence driving Tokyo's Arctic attention, but Chinese Arctic ambitions as well. As Furuya describes: "Concerning Chinese

[260] Barry Scott Zellen, "Japan's Emerging Arctic Interests: An Interview with CDR Kentaro Furuya, JCG," United States Coast Guard Academy website, August 19, 2009.

activity in the Arctic Sea, Japan's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Yohei Kono, has stated at the Diet that, 'Since the mid-1900s, China has been focusing on the Arctic and its research in the Arctic, starting with top diplomacy with Arctic countries,' then having 'constructed icebreakers domestically,' followed more recently with Beijing having 'published a white paper on such Arctic policy.' As Foreign Affairs Minister Kono noted, 'The Japanese government has exchanged views on these efforts with China, and has urged them to increase the transparency of China's policy intentions, and will continue to work on [this] in the future.' I would like to keep an eye on the Chinese Arctic policy."[261]

Furuya notes Japan's interest in the Arctic has been steadily growing for many years, even if it only has recently caught the attention of JCG leadership. As he describes, Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) "has continuously dispatched experts to the Arctic Council from 2013 [with] observer status," and Japan's "Cabinet office took initiatives to consolidate the Arctic Policy from 2015, and the Headquarters for Ocean Policy formulated three

[261] Barry Scott Zellen, "Japan's Emerging Arctic Interests: An Interview with CDR Kentaro Furuya, JCG," United States Coast Guard Academy website, August 19, 2009.

pillars concerting the Arctic policy" – R&D, international cooperation, and sustainable use – and then in April 2019, "the Advisory Board to the Headquarters submitted its opinion to the Prime Minister" in which it "firstly, recognized that Japan is located adjacent to the Arctic sea and likely to influence environmental change in the Arctic Ocean."[262] And, as "the nearest country among Asian nations, Japan may enjoy the benefit of increasing Arctic activities, exploitation of resources and other economical and commercial activities. Further, the Board suggested concrete examples such as establishing a support system for seeking the best route for ships supported by satellite technology and meteorological and floating ice expectation technology. This system is expected to contribute to sustainable use based on research and development."[263]

Additionally, the Advisory Board to Headquarters for Ocean Policy "highlighted the importance of the rules-based order including freedom of navigation in the Arctic Sea;" in order for there to be

[262] Barry Scott Zellen, "Japan's Emerging Arctic Interests: An Interview with CDR Kentaro Furuya, JCG," United States Coast Guard Academy website, August 19, 2009.
[263] Ibid.

"sustainable use of NSR or NWP, shipping activity must be governed by rules prescribed in the relevant international law. In particular, Russian regulations and measures should be watched out carefully."[264] These principles have been "endorsed in the deliberation at the Diet, too" and in April 2019, "the Executive Director General, Policy and Policy Promotion Office, Cabinet Office, Mr. Masashi Shigeta stated at the House of Representatives, Foreign and Defense Commission, that 'Japan is the closest to the Arctic Ocean in Asia, and because it can enjoy economic and commercial opportunities such as the utilization of its route and resource development, we consider the Arctic policy to be an extremely important policy issue. We need to work to further strengthen our presence in the international community. For this reason, in the Third Ocean Basic Plan, which was decided by the Cabinet in May last year [2018], the promotion of the Arctic policy is treated as an independent item as a major policy.'"[265] Inclusive in this articulation of Tokyo's elevation of interest in the Arctic to the level of major policy were the three pillars of

[264] Barry Scott Zellen, "Japan's Emerging Arctic Interests: An Interview with CDR Kentaro Furuya, JCG," United States Coast Guard Academy website, August 19, 2009.
[265] Ibid.

Japan's Arctic policy – research and development (R&D), international cooperation, and sustainable use – with R&D to include "observation over the Arctic region during the five-year planning period" in an effort at "strengthening the research system;" and international cooperation to include collaborative diplomatic efforts "such as active participation in international rule formation;" and sustainable use to include "three areas of utilization of the Arctic Ocean route, and sustainable ocean economic promotion in the Arctic region."[266]

'An Age of Climate Crisis and Growing Great Power Competition'

Japan released its fourth and most current BPOP in April 2023, which Khan Pham has observed "further demonstrated the country's growing engagement in the Polar North. While the fundamental priorities around research, international cooperation, and sustainable utilization remain consistent across the Second and Third Basic Plan on Ocean Policy, the updated policy reveals meaningful evolutions that showcase Japan

[266] Barry Scott Zellen, "Japan's Emerging Arctic Interests: An Interview with CDR Kentaro Furuya, JCG," United States Coast Guard Academy website, August 19, 2009.

assuming a more assertive Arctic identity to match its interests with influence."[267] Japan's fourth BPOP "reaffirms Japan's commitment to (1) enhancing Arctic research capabilities to guide its Arctic-related decisions, (2) fostering international scientific cooperation, and (3) nurturing the next generation of talent to address Arctic issues. It underscores the importance of contributing to international forums such as the Arctic Council, and cooperative frameworks with other Arctic states, to help shape rules and norms," and "also emphasizes the importance of creating a safe environment for Japanese shipping companies when utilizing the Arctic Sea Route by using satellite data to create sea ice charts, thereby enhancing Arctic navigation safety. It also encourages the Japanese business community's active participation in international forums such as the Arctic Economic Council and the Arctic Circle to expand Arctic region economic activities, while prioritizing sustainable Arctic resource development and shipping route use."[268]

Of note, the latest Plan "provides more concrete details on developing technologies to strengthen

[267] Khan Pham, "Japan Steps Up Its Arctic Engagement," *The Arctic Institute*, April 16, 2024.
[268] Ibid.

Arctic observation capabilities, including constructing a new ice-breaking research vessel," and "puts more emphasis on adhering to international law principles such as freedom of navigation in the Arctic Ocean, which is aligned with its Free and Open Indo-Pacific Vision."[269] It also "reflects recent negotiations culminating in a 2021 legally binding agreement … which came into force in June 2021" that "bans unregulated fishing in Central Arctic Ocean international waters. As an active participant in these talks since 2015, Japan strictly adheres to this treaty on sustainable fisheries management regimen. This approach balances imminent economic opportunity with long-term conservation needs in the face of warming, acidic waters, and shifting fish stocks."[270]

Additionally, the current BPOP addresses "sustainable utilization," described by Pham as "particularly exciting" and "provides more detailed strategies to support Japanese shipping companies in utilizing the Arctic Sea Route. This includes (1) collecting information on the Arctic region and the Arctic Sea Route, and (2) fostering cooperation

[269] Khan Pham, "Japan Steps Up Its Arctic Engagement," *The Arctic Institute*, April 16, 2024.
[270] Ibid.

between industry, academia, and government, with an emphasis on information sharing. The plan also prioritizes climate change mitigation and Arctic environmental conservation."[271] Pham points out the fourth BPOP "reveals a notably more proactive, assertive, and ambitious tone across the main pillars of research, international cooperation, and sustainable utilization than its predecessors. In particular, with the fourth version further empowering sustainable utilization, Japan cements itself as an engaged steward rather than a bystander across Arctic development to set the standard for the entire region," thereby illustrating "Japan's pragmatic understanding of the complex dynamics shaping the 21st-century Arctic amid climate change and internationalization."[272] As Pham describes, in "an age of climate crisis and growing great power competition, Japan faces increasing incentives to engage itself across the Arctic region's research, governance, and emerging commerce landscape. As demonstrated in the fourth version, the country asserts itself as an essential partner in stewarding and studying this vital region alongside fellow concerned nations. Both international

[271] Khan Pham, "Japan Steps Up Its Arctic Engagement," *The Arctic Institute*, April 16, 2024.
[272] Ibid.

collaboration and domestic coordination are key vehicles for Japan to match its ambitions with its capabilities in an increasingly busy Polar North."[273]

Beijing and Tokyo Look to the North: Converging Arctic Policies in a Time of Bipolar Divergence

Just three years after Japan adopted its 2015 Arctic Policy, China's 2018 Arctic Policy quickly gained widespread notoriety and generated much controversy in the West for its assertion of China's status as a near-Arctic state. In contrast, Japan's 2015 Arctic policy and subsequent revisions to its Basic Plan on Ocean Policy have generated far fewer headlines in the West, and none of the controversy, even though Tokyo's and Beijing's Arctic policies have much in common including their commitment to a cooperative Arctic, to the preservation of its environment, to the promotion of its sustainable use, and to the rights of its indigenous peoples. Tokyo has demonstrated an equally pro-active commitment to the region, mirroring the embrace of the other active Asian states who joined the Arctic Council as observers

[273] Khan Pham, "Japan Steps Up Its Arctic Engagement," *The Arctic Institute*, April 16, 2024.

with Japan in 2013 and their mutual commitment to Arctic engagement within a wider framework of Arctic multilateral and multilevel cooperation, including with the region's indigenous peoples and to its environment and ecosystems. Indeed, Japan's 2015 Arctic policy and China's 2018 Arctic policy each mention indigenous issues seven times, reflecting an alignment that carries over to other policy areas including sustainable use of the Arctic and its resources, protection of the Arctic environment, and responding to and when possible mitigating the consequences of climate change.

While Japan's 2015 Arctic Policy arrived without controversy, Beijing's 2018 Arctic strategy (in the form of a white paper) generated much controversy from the get go, and became both a diplomatic talking point around which the western/democratic Arctic states aligned in uproarious opposition, and something of a global meme by coining (and bringing worldwide notoriety to) the phrase "near-Arctic" to describe China's own self-perceived and audaciously promoted *Arcticness*. Indeed, much of the controversy over China's 2018 Arctic strategy was triggered by the impassioned (and seemingly allergic) reaction throughout the West (and particularly by the United

States) to Beijing's innovative and provocative use of near-Arctic to describe its geographical and geopolitical proximity to the Arctic. It is thus of no surprise that the term "near-Arctic" is not used by Tokyo, even though Japan's geographic and geopolitical proximity to the Arctic compares well with China's, as do their historic claims to sovereignty over waters and territories further north, and today under Russia's sovereign control (and, with regard to Japan's brief year-long imperial rule over the outer Aleutian Islands, America's as well). Much attention has been devoted to China's Arctic ambitions, particularly since Beijing's infamous white paper was released on January 26, 2018, which asserted that "China is an important stakeholder in Arctic affairs. Geographically, China is a 'Near-Arctic State', one of the continental States that are closest to the Arctic Circle."[274]

While Beijing's assertion drew widespread attention both within and beyond the Arctic policy world, not everyone embraced China's claim of near-Arctic statehood. This became evident in the recent comments from (then) Secretary of State Mike

[274] The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, "China's Arctic Policy," White Paper, January 26, 2018.

Pompeo in Rovaniemi at the Arctic Council ministerial of May 2019. There, Pompeo dismissed the entire concept as pure fantasy: "Beijing claims to be a 'Near-Arctic State,' yet the shortest distance between China and the Arctic is 900 miles. There are only Arctic States and Non-Arctic States. No third category exists, and claiming otherwise entitles China to exactly nothing."[275] Secretary Pompeo did not dismiss China's interest in the Arctic nor Beijing's ambition to engage with the Arctic diplomatically or economically. Indeed, transparent Chinese investment would always be welcome, he pledged, but not – Pompeo added – debt-trap diplomacy of the sort that had overwhelmed governments from Sri Lanka to Malaysia that became "ensnared by debt and corruption," a fate Pompeo wanted Arctic nations and vulnerable indigenous communities to be spared.

Ironically, China may well have been not only a near-Arctic state, but Asia's pre-eminent polar power, had it retained sovereign control of the far

[275] Michael R. Pompeo, "Looking North: Sharpening America's Arctic Focus," Speech Delivered in Rovaniemi, Finland, United States Department of State Archives, May 6, 2019.

northeastern corner of the Qing empire, which came firmly under Manchu dominion by the 17th century, and was recognized as such by its regional rival, Russia, in the 1689 Treaty of Nerchinsk, with the Manchurian border reaching as far north as the 56th degree parallel, and as far east as the Sea of Japan across from Sakhalin, which was already a Chinese tributary since the preceding Ming era. This historical case is perhaps China's strongest argument for asserting a near-Arctic status, but one that Beijing, curiously, does not make publicly (but which news reports suggest drives its innermost and most secretive counterintelligence thinking).[276] In the mid-19th century, the Russian Empire expanded into outer Manchuria, and these territorial gains were formally conceded by the Qing dynasty in the 1858 Treaty of Aigun and the 1860 Treaty of Peking, resulting in today's Russo-Chinese border that wraps around Manchuria, much the way the trans-Siberian railroad hooks to the south as it approaches its eastern terminus in Vladivostok. Had China not recognized Russia's imperial expansion onto Manchurian lands, and instead successfully

[276] Adam Entous, Julian E. Barnes and Adam Goldman, "Intelligence Suggests Pro-Ukrainian Group Sabotaged Pipelines, U.S. Officials Say," New York *Times*, March 7, 2023.

contested Russia's sovereignty over these lands, it would be a near-Arctic state today. Even a vocal assertion by Beijing of traditional sovereign dominion over these lands would help convey a sense of urgency to its near-Arctic aspirations, much the way it has done in the South China Sea. But as Beijing fortifies contested islands to its southeast while vocally reiterating its impassioned (even if not recognized as valid) claims, it remains silent on its long-surrendered northeastern lands, leaving Russia the undisputed sovereign of Eurasia's far northeast.

Importantly, around the same time that China retreated from outer Manchuria, its neighbor Japan began to expand north to Hokkaido, in part to prevent further Russian expansion toward Japan, and later to crush the last stronghold of Tokugawa loyalists who rose up in rebellion in 1868, formally expanding Japan's sovereignty to Hokkaido the next year and initiating a broader colonial expansion by Japan that later reached Sakhalin, the Korean peninsula, and Manchuria itself. Two years earlier, the United States, via the Treaty of Purchase (1867), gained possession of Alaska from Russia, and three years after that, Canada finalized its purchase of Rupert's land from the Hudson's Bay Company

(1870) after agreeing to purchase Rupert's Land a year earlier, and just two years after Canada's confederation as an independent state in 1867. The sovereign boundaries of much of today's Arctic were thus established during a relatively brief period of northward state expansion in both North America and Eurasia, but because of China's southward retreat during this same period, it became, as Secretary Pompeo has pointed out, a non-Arctic and not a near-Arctic state as Japan's northward expansion at the same time positioned it to become a *bona fide* near-Arctic state if there ever was one, and briefly even a polar power (until dislodged from the Bering Sea and High North Pacific by American military power). If China's case for being near-Arctic has much historic merit, the same can be said for Japan, as it was briefly an Arctic power at the zenith of its global empire in 1942 when it held the outer Aleutians for over a year.

While it is true that the Aleutians are well south of the Arctic Circle, they are included by virtue of their climate, geography, and indigenous cultures in many definitions of the Arctic region (including America's own official definition), making their possession a qualifying precondition for being a

bona fide Arctic state, and their subsequent dispossession restoring Japan to its previous status as a near-Arctic state, by virtue of Hokkaido's adjacency to the Russian Far East and the eastern terminus of the Northern Sea Route (NSR), along with its many other northern climatic, geographic, historic and cultural features discussed above that instill in Japan an inherent *Arcticness* familiar to residents of the circumpolar Arctic and near-Arctic – including its winter sea ice, intense snow, long cold winters, as well as its Ainu indigenous culture, whose traditional homeland extends all the way up to Sakhalin, Kamchatka, and the northern Kurils. There thus may be much unappreciated merit to Beijing's assertion in 2019 of being near-Arctic, even as the term, in response primarily to American diplomatic pushback against China in 2019, falls from use and all but disappears from China's own policy documents – so long as it is properly qualified by nearness, proximity and/or adjacency in climate, geography, history and culture. But for China, as Secretary Pompeo argued, its claim of being a near-Arctic state is now, and has been since its Qing dynasty retreat from outer Manchuria, well past its expiration date – by well over a century and a half. While for Japan, its near-Arctic history is

more recent by half as many years, with roots in the middle of the 20th century, a time of GPC reminiscent in many ways to our present era. Japan – an archipelagic state comparable to the island nations of Iceland and the Danish quasi-colony of Greenland for their geostrategic importance adjacent to emergent Arctic sea lanes (and proximity to increasingly active Russian naval bastions), thanks to its own northward expansion to Hokkaido around the same time as China's retreat from outer Manchuria – presents the western world with an important allied gateway to the increasingly strategic (and militarized) waters adjacent to the eastern entrance to the NSR.

Russia Enters the Fray: Implications of Putin's 2018 Ainu Recognition and the Looming Battle for the Arctic's Human Terrain

Just as Japan and China both acknowledge the importance of engagement with the Arctic's indigenous peoples in their respective 2015 and 2018 Arctic strategies, indigenous issues are also prominent in Russia's 2020 Arctic strategy, where they are mentioned at least 17 times.[277] With

[277] Russian Maritime Studies Institute at the Naval War College, English Translation of "Foundations of the Russian

Moscow's noteworthy commitment to the "preservation of the native lands and traditional ways of life of minority groups" in its 2020 Arctic strategy, one can reinterpret Putin's 2018 Ainu recognition as his initial articulation of a strategy for expansion beyond Russia's current occupation of the southern Kurils, with a war for eventual "reunification" possible (indeed, perhaps even likely) – much the way the Kremlin perceives the war in Ukraine, fueling its determination and helping to ameliorate the high toll in killed and injured troops, lost, damaged and destroyed equipment, and treasure, to the surprise of many critics. But history shows time and again that Russia, if anything, is determined and more than fickle democratic states can stomach steep military losses when the destiny of mother Russia is at stake.

This puts recent diplomatic trends and military activity in and around Japan's northern territories into a new and troubling light. Even if victory proves elusive in such a war, Russia's capacity to bog down its opponent in a seemingly forever war of attrition marked by little in the way of battlefield advances at a seemingly inexplicable high cost in

Federation State Policy in the Arctic for the Period up to 2035," March 5, 2020.

losses could in fact be Moscow's end game: creating a frozen conflict that forever paralyzes Japan and its western allies while holding the line of contact well within the hitherto sovereign territory of its military opponent and thereby keeping the NSR open for business even has Japan fights for its national survival. Is such a scenario imminent? Unlikely. But can it nonetheless be inevitable? Perhaps. At the very least it is something to worry about and plan to forestall. This leads us to a necessary reconceptualization of Arctic diplomacy and security through a converged lens blending Westphalian precepts and transnational/indigenous "post-Westphalian" precepts (borrowing a phrase coined by Jessica Shadian in her dissertation and subsequent articles on the emergence of a distinctively Inuit polity in the Arctic that possesses traits of both a sovereign and subnational nature, and which I have discussed elsewhere at length.[278]

According to Ural Federal University, "In late 2018 the Russian President Vladimir Putin agreed with

[278] Barry Scott Zellen, *Arctic Exceptionalism: Cooperation in a Contested World*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2024; Heather N. Nicol and Barry Scott Zellen, "Reflections of Changing Views of Canada's Arctic Sovereignty: Resilience and Change in the Liberal State," *Cosmos + Taxis*, Issue 9 + 10 (2022).

the proposal to recognize the Ainu as the indigenous people of Russia, which fueled concern among the Ainu living in Hokkaido (because 'Russians' might be granted more privileges – for example, group rights to fishing)."[279] That Russian president Vladimir Putin described the Ainu as indigenous people Russia further reinforces Hokkaido's (and therefore Japan's) near-Arctic status (being part of the same northern, indigenous homeland that Putin now recognizes as part of mother Russia), much the way the long presence of indigenous Unangan (Aleut) culture reinforces the Aleutians' (and by extension, America's) own *Arcticness*, and its own long Inuit cultural presence reinforces Canada's own *Arcticness*.

These interesting but little reported pronouncements by Putin recognizing the Ainu people (whose homeland, since World War II's end, has been partitioned by Russia and Japan) as indigenous to Russia, caught the attention of some Japanese, and may well have accelerated its otherwise glacial pace of recognizing Ainu indigenous rights, which had been only incrementally advancing, leaving Japan vulnerable to a more pro-active (if not sincerely

[279] Ural Federal University, "Ainu People Claims Japan Indigenous People Rights," *UrFU.ru*, March 26, 2019.

normative) but more Machiavellian approach by Moscow on Ainu rights issues, potentially planting a seed for an eventual sovereign claim by Russia over Hokkaido as part of "Russia's" Ainu homeland (and potentially providing a pretext for invasion to justify a war of "reunification" similar to the current conflict in Ukraine), with the Ainu conveniently and newly portrayed by Putin as a Russian indigenous people. Some niche Internet news sites have speculated that Putin had been considering Hokkaido for just such war before elevating Ukraine as his initial target for imperial re-expansion while leaving Hokkaido as a potential second theater, with a dusty and an unimplemented Soviet-era war plan from the waning days of World War II ready to go.[280]

[280] I learned of Putin's 2018 Ainu recognition from Hokkaido University Associate Professor on the Research Faculty of Media and Communication and Graduate School of Education, Multicultural Education Course, Jeffry Gayman, cited above, when visiting Hokkaido to present a guest talk at its Arctic Research Center in 2019; Gayman is a renowned scholar of Ainu education and policy who came to Hokkaido via Alaska, where he earned his master's degree in Cross-Cultural Studies at the University of Alaska, Fairbanks before moving to Japan for his doctorate in Educational Anthropology at Kyushu University.

According to Japan's International Research Institute of Controversial Histories, "In Russia, however, assertions not based on science have been made. In December 2018, it was reported that Russia's President Putin intended to acknowledge the Ainu people as indigenous Russians. Furthermore, in April 2022, vice-chairman of the State Duma, the lower house of the Russian Parliament, Sergei Mironov reportedly stated, 'According to certain experts, Russia owns all rights in Hokkaido.' Also in April 2022, 'According to Regunam News [Russian web-media], political scientist Sergei Chernyakhovsky maintained that 'Tokyo [the Japanese Government] improperly retains Hokkaido, which was politically Russian territory.' Referring to the assertion made in the Treaty of Commerce and Navigation between Japan and Russia concluded in 1855, the report stated: 'There [in Hokkaido] the Ainu people lived. They are the same people that live in Sakhalin, in the suburbs of Vladivostok and in the south of the Kamchatka Peninsula and are one of the peoples of Russia.' Let us put President Putin's assertion in the current context. In September 2022, he stated a new diplomatic policy, called 'Russia's World' and stipulated that Russia will intervene in countries in

support of Russian inhabitants. And according to another report, Russia planned to militarily intervene in Hokkaido before it invaded Ukraine."[281] Amidst the present circumstances in Ukraine, and with Russia's continued occupation of the entire Kuril Island chain since the final hours of World War II, even if not mainstream views, they may nonetheless be a harbinger for future concern and consideration (as Putin's interest in conquering Ukraine by force likely had origins well outside of mainstream of political, diplomatic and strategic thought before becoming state policy.) Should Russia turn its attention to Hokkaido next, it will be driven in large part by Russia's concerns with China's military rise and the threat Beijing could ultimately present to Russian sovereignty in its vulnerable Far East.

Indeed, while Moscow and Beijing are now closely aligned, it would be shortsighted to presume this alignment will remain enduring given their past enmity and the potential for a future breakup. Indeed, according to the New York *Times*, newly acquired and independently authenticated

[281] International Research Institute of Controversial Histories, "Leave the Ainu Issue Unattended and Hokkaido Will Become a Second Ukraine," March 1, 2023.

intelligence documents from Russia reveal deep concerns in its FSB counterintelligence community with Moscow's alignment with Beijing, and describe Russia's efforts to counter the many emergent long-term threats China could pose against Russian interests, including future assertions by China of territorial claims intent on redressing unjust historical treaties that codified imperial Russia's 19th century expansion onto Chinese-controlled territories: "Mr. Putin and Xi Jinping, China's leader, are doggedly pursuing what they call a partnership with 'no limits'. But the top-secret FSB memo shows there are, in fact, limits. … In public, President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia says his country's growing friendship with China is unshakable — a strategic military and economic collaboration that has entered a golden era. But in the corridors of Lubyanka, the headquarters of Russia's domestic security agency, known as the FSB, a secretive intelligence unit refers to the Chinese as 'the enemy'."[282] Further, "China is searching for traces of 'ancient Chinese peoples' in the Russian Far East, possibly to

[282] Adam Entous, Julian E. Barnes and Adam Goldman, "Intelligence Suggests Pro-Ukrainian Group Sabotaged Pipelines, U.S. Officials Say," New York *Times*, March 7, 2023.

influence local opinion that is favorable to Chinese claims," the document says. In 2023, China published an official map that included historical Chinese names for cities and areas within Russia."[283] As the New York *Times* further describes: "Russia has long feared encroachment by China along their shared 2,615-mile border. And Chinese nationalists for years have taken issue with 19th-century treaties in which Russia annexed large portions of land, including modern-day Vladivostok. That issue is now of key concern, with Russia weakened by the war and economic sanctions and less able than ever to push back against Beijing."[284]

While much attention has been focused on China's increasing strategic and diplomatic alignment with Russia, and its implications for the security of the Arctic and the world, the West has not sat idly by during Moscow's and Beijing's consolidation into an increasingly unified regional bloc. Indeed, in lockstep with the tightening Beijing-Moscow

[283] Adam Entous, Julian E. Barnes and Adam Goldman, "Intelligence Suggests Pro-Ukrainian Group Sabotaged Pipelines, U.S. Officials Say," New York *Times*, March 7, 2023.
[284] Ibid.

alignment, NATO has expanded in a rapid fashion to now include the formerly neutral Nordic states, Finland and Sweden, and while Arctic North America has experienced new tensions since President Trump's return to the White House in 2025, owing to his openly expressed ambition to annex Greenland, and on some days even Canada as well (in whole or part), even this can be seen as a regional/continental consolidation into a singular bloc mirroring the diplomatic and strategic alignment under way in Northeast Asia.

But Japan does not stand alone, and as discussed above, has its own hand to play, evident in its alignment with the democratic Arctic Council members on indigenous issues (discussed above), and in its own distinctive whaling diplomacy which unites Japan's whaling heritage and commitment to its preservation with both the commercial whaling states (Iceland and Norway) and the subsistence-indigenous whaling nations of Arctic North America, the United States, Canada and Greenland, finding principles in common beyond their parallel structures of constitutional democracy and commitments to the rule of law to forge a united front with likeminded nations to its north –

such as their convergent approaches to indigenous engagement and collaboration.

Indeed, while a double-edged sword, indigenous engagement and collaboration is no less a potential tool to solidify Arctic international solidarity and to re-establish a new foundation for enduring Arctic stability. Engaging in the battle for influence of the indigenous Arctic human terrain could thus be to Russia's, Japan's, China's and the West's mutual advantage, helping to neutralize a diplomatic and political vulnerability vis-à-vis the West while forestalling further re-militarization and bifurcation of the Arctic into dueling blocs. And in so doing, the inter-Arctic collaborative dynamic could be re-strengthened – further neutralizing any risk associated with the Arctic's increasingly competitive Westphalian strategic competition.

With its deep pockets, China could take the opportunity to retool its approach as well, continuing its above-noted shift away from its coercive and unequal economic power-grab of "debt-trap" diplomacy to foster a more symbiotic model of Arctic economic development, positioning Beijing to more adeptly exploit any failures by the Arctic states to sufficiently support and re-empower

their own indigenous peoples, who are intimately aware of any unevenness in Arctic social, cultural and economic development, a shift already achieved at the rhetorical/articulated-policy level in its 2018 Arctic white paper where Beijing, matching Tokyo in 2015, makes reference to indigenous issues seven times, matching its neighbor and historic rival word for word – but as noted above, falling short of Russia's 2020 Arctic policy update that mentions indigenous, tribal and native issues more than twice as often, clocking in at 17 mentions.

A triumph by the democratic Arctic and near-Arctic states is by no means guaranteed with regard to the battle for indigenous hearts and minds; but they still have many advantages over Russia and China that could make it difficult for either of these rivals to meaningfully undermine western influence in the region, and thereby dilute the well-established sovereignty they have over their respective Arctic and near-Arctic territories. Tomorrow's battlefields for control of the human terrain of the Arctic could thus unfold in places as far afield as Hokkaido and the Kuril archipelago, the Aleutian Islands, Nunavut, and Greenland, Arctic and near-Arctic fronts for the continuing movement for the restoration of indigenous rights, autonomy, and

perhaps even one day soon, sovereignty. And where the West (inclusive of Japan since the end of World War II) is as much a colonial hegemon (with histories of expansion that displaced, disrupted, and disempowered indigenous systems of governance before reforming and fostering reconciliation) as it is an arbiter of democratic self-governance. Whether the West sustains its collective legitimacy as the undisputed sovereign of the democratic Arctic and near-Arctic territories as it now does, or yields to indigenous forces of independence, remains to be seen – as does whether its nonwestern rivals (principally China and Russia) can find a foothold to win over northern indigenous peoples to their side in this looming struggle for control of the Arctic's (and near-Arctic's) human terrain.

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