

Japan's Emerging Arctic Interests: An Interview with CDR Kentaro Furuya, JCG

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To gain insight in Japan's Arctic interests, policies, and strategy, we spoke with CDR Kentaro Furuya, Professor of International Law of the Sea, Japan Coast Guard Academy (JCGA) and Adjunct Professor at Japan's National Graduate Institute for Policy Studies (GRIPS) who recently visited the Center for Arctic Study and Policy (CASP) at the U.S. Coast Guard Academy, where he met with CASP director, Cara Condit, Captain Russ Bowman, interim head of the Department of Humanities, and Barry Zellen, the class of 1965 Arctic Scholar.

While the Japan Coast Guard (JCG) has what he describes as "limited interests on Arctic issues," CDR Furuya points out that Japan is nonetheless "located close to the Arctic Sea and is a junction for ships to and from" Arctic waters. 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. 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 agents, and Chinese provocations, only recently turning its attention to the Arctic as new challenges emanating from Arctic waters emerge. This is not unlike the USCG, with its long northern presence but more recent mission orientation to security threats emanating from America's south, which has recently returned its attention on the Arctic, enhancing its Arctic operational capabilities with its heavy icebreaker modernization program which will introduce its first Polar Security Cutter, a new generation of heavy icebreakers, in just a few years.

While USCG strategy, like American national security strategy generally, has embraced a multilateral approach to the Arctic until recently, Russia's resurgence as a sea power and the modernization of its subsurface fleet, combined with China's continuing naval expansion (and recently articulated Arctic strategy), has similarly galvanized the attention of USCG leadership at the highest levels, precipitating an update of its strategic outlook for the Arctic region in response to the return of Westphalian state competition in the Arctic basin. This rapid demise of a multilateral Arctic defined by a utopic, transnational "Arctic exceptionalism" and the return of a more Hobbesian High North more akin to the Wild West of yore, has caught the attention of coast guard leaders on both sides of the Pacific.

CDR Furuya notes Japan's interest in the Arctic has been steady and growing for many years, even if it only now has 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 pillars concerting the Arctic policy" – R&D, international cooperation, and sustainable use – and then this past 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" 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.”

Additionally, CDR Furuya observed, the Advisory Board to Headquarters for Ocean Policy “highlighted the importance of the rule base order including freedom of navigation in the Arctic Sea,” since in order for there to be “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.” These principles have been “endorsed in the deliberation at the Diet, too,” and this past April, “the Executive Director General, Policy and Policy Promotion Office, Cabinet Office, Mr. Masashi Shigeta stated at the House of Representative, 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, the promotion of the Arctic policy is treated as an independent item as a major policy.’”

Inclusive in this articulation of Tokyo’s elevation of interest in the Arctic to the level of major policy were the three pillars of Japan’s Arctic policy: 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, lastly, sustainable use to include “three areas of utilization of the Arctic Ocean route, and sustainable ocean economic promotion in the Arctic region.”

As noted in the USCG’s May 2019 updated strategic outlook for the Arctic region, it’s not just Russia’s resurgence that’s driving Tokyo’s Arctic awakening, but Chinese Arctic ambitions as well (in alignment with China’s broader naval expansion, and continuing rise as a great power). As CDR Furuya describes, “Concerning Chinese 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.”